

ORIGINALS



116

JET

A dramatic illustration of a jet fighter, possibly a P-51 Mustang, shown from a low angle as if banking sharply. The aircraft is dark with a red stripe along the fuselage and a red star insignia. It is surrounded by large, billowing clouds of black smoke and orange flames, suggesting it is under attack or in a dogfight. In the upper right, the tails of other jet fighters are visible against the bright yellow background.

**FRANK
HARVEY**

**Rocket-swift
stories of the
Air Force —
on guard
in a world of
dazzling speed**

BALLANTINE BOOKS

SPEED-

These magnificent stories are right out of the heart of the jet-propelled age—the era of the one-day round-trip over the Atlantic.

They're stories about your Air Force *now*. And the planes those men are flying *now*. And the problems they're facing. *Now*.

You'll fly with a defense squadron against a runaway ship containing an atomic bomb. You'll ride with a disgruntled civilian who learns why jets are buzzing his town. You'll join a hand-picked squadron off to a secret base to test a strange new weapon—only to find that their security isn't as good as they thought.

And there's more.

You'll live fast, climb fast, fight fast

in

JET

This is an original collection—not a reprint
—published by Ballantine Books, Inc.

Frank. Harvey

JET

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

These stories originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. "Runaway Bomber," "Stand By to Bail Out!" and "The Frightened Pilot" were copyrighted 1954; and "Murder in the Sky," "Volunteer Assignment," "Flame-Out," and "Scramble Nighthawk!" were copyrighted 1955, all by The Curtis Publishing Company.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BALLANTINE BOOKS, INC.
404 Fifth Avenue • New York 18, N. Y.

CONTENTS

Runaway Bomber

Murder in the Sky

Volunteer Assignment

Flame-Out

Stand By to Bail Out!

The Frightened Pilot

Scramble Nighthawk!

Runaway Bomber

Lt. Jim Stackhouse awoke before daylight and lay a little while listening to his wife's deep, soft breathing beside him, and the tiny snuffling snore of four-year-old Hanky in the crib across the room. It was warm, even for Southern California, and all the windows were open. Presently Stackhouse heard an engine fire up on the airfield. The sound rose to a high hard thunder, held briefly, and died to a mutter. Stackhouse got out of bed and went into the bathroom, shutting the door before he turned on the light. In the mirror over the washstand his face was bright pink from sunburn. He wet his face with warm water and was gingerly rubbing in some brushless shaving cream when he heard the phone ring in the bedroom.

Christine had it when he went back in. He sat down on the bed beside her and took the receiver. "Lieutenant Stackhouse speaking."

"Stack, this is Phil Regan on duty at squadron. You up?"

"Just shaving. What's the matter?"

"I don't know. Colonel Griffiths called in a minute ago and said to alert all the pilots. He's on his way over to the briefing room now. He wants everyone there as soon as possible."

"What for?" Stackhouse asked. "We aren't scheduled to fly until ten."

"Beats me," Regan said. "But you better move, boy. The Old Man sounded as if he meant it."

"Thanks, Phil. Be right over."

He hung up and looked at his wife, sitting in the wedge of light from the bathroom door. She was a shapely brunette, a little on the plump side, in a blue nylon nightie. Her hair was tousled and her face was pink and marked with sleep creases, and her brown eyes were very bright. Stackhouse leaned toward her. Suddenly he seized her by the shoulders and thrust her down in bed and kissed her on the mouth. She fought him madly for a moment, then stopped fighting and kissed him back.

He shifted his mouth next to her ear. "Listen, Mrs. Stackhouse," he whispered. "If a man comes around today and wants to sign you up for the movies, you tell him to go away or I'll kill him. You hear?"

Christine giggled. "You're crazy."

"Sure," he whispered. "Why not?"

"What was the phone about, honey?"

"Duty officer," he said. "The colonel's called a shotgun briefing. It's probably some kind of a security exercise."

"I'll make you some coffee and toast."

"Haven't got time, honey. I'll grab something at squadron."

He shaved quickly, cutting his upper lip slightly in the rush, dressed and went back into the bedroom again. Hanky was still asleep on his stomach, with one bare foot thrust out between the bars of his crib. Jim bent, gave the bare foot a pat, then kissed Christine and hurried to his car.

The sun was still down behind the mountains when he drove through the Air Force base housing development. The sky overhead was bright as steel and he was beginning to sweat a little. He showed his pass to the air policeman on the gate, drove down to the flight line and parked near his squadron building. Twelve F-100 Super Sabres were lined up in a row on the hardstand. They were USAF's newest and best supersonic fighters—big, flat-bellied, metal cigars with arrowhead wings and droop-snoot air intakes. They were powered with Pratt and Whitney J-57's, complete with after-burners. They would bust through Mach 1 in level flight on power alone, no sweat.

As Stackhouse trotted across the hardstand he saw a small procession of rocket buggies being towed up the line loaded with high-velocity aircraft rockets. When he went into the building, two air policemen blocked him at the door to the briefing room.'

"Can we see your ID card, please, sir?"

"Hey," Stackhouse said. "Wha' hoppen?"

"Orders, sir. Nobody can go in unless he's a pilot in this squadron."

Stackhouse showed them his card. They checked it against a list they had. Then they looked at the photograph and matched it with his face. Then they let him through.

The room was full of pilots. Colonel Griffiths, the group commander, was sitting on a table up front, smoking a cigar. Griffiths was a stocky man with John L. Lewis type eyebrows, a GI haircut parted in the middle, and tough, keen eyes. Behind him was a large illuminated map of the Pacific. Stackhouse sat down beside Buck Kretz, one of his section mates. Kretz turned toward him. He had a very red face, big protruding ears and the hot, light-colored eyes of the born fighter.

Stackhouse leaned toward him. "What's up?" he whispered.

"Don't know yet," Kretz whispered back. "The Old Man's holding off till he gets everybody here."

Stackhouse felt a slight thrill. Things had been getting dull on the base. The excitement of being one of the first air groups outfitted with Super Sabres had worn off. If Colonel Griffiths had a hairy mission up his sleeve, let him pull it out and lay it on the table.

Several pilots came in and sat down. There was a short wait. Then two pilots came in with an air policeman. The AP walked up and saluted Colonel Griffiths. "Everyone accounted for, sir."

Griffiths returned the salute. "Thanks, sergeant. Now get this. I'm going to lock that door after you when you leave. I don't want anyone to come into this

room except on urgent official business. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

The AP saluted and left. Griffiths locked the door. Then he went to the front of the room, laid his cigar on an ash tray and faced them.

He said, "I'm about to give you some secret information. If this information should leak out in this area, there might be a panic. People might get killed."

Stackhouse heard Buck Kretz take a breath.

"At three-oh-eight in the morning, our time," Colonel Griffiths said, "a B-52 Stratofort took off from a secret base in the Pacific about eleven hundred miles west of Eniwetok atoll. You all know the B-52. It's our newest eight-jet intercontinental bomber. This one was carrying a heavy load of fuel and a hydrogen bomb. It was going to make a live drop on Eniwetok and return to base."

Stackhouse leaned forward in his seat. It was absolutely quiet in the room. A fly spatted crazily over the ceiling in the silence.

Griffiths went on in a matter-of-fact voice, "The 52 was escorted for the first five hundred miles by Sabrejets. Then Grumman Cougars from an aircraft carrier took over. The Cougars escorted the 52 to within two hundred miles of the drop point and turned back. The bomber climbed to its maximum altitude and took up its final heading toward the target. A hundred miles from the release point they began a dive to pick up speed to insure they would clear the blast area after the drop. The pilots were in contact with Surface Control. Seventy miles out, the pilots reported a slight malfunction in the rudder control of their automatic pilot, and advised they were turning off the rudder switch. The plane was still on auto pilot, but, with the rudder switch off, was not held on any particular heading. The pilots felt they could hold their heading better by manual control. When the B-52 was about forty miles from the target, Surface Control heard a muffled explosion over the radio. They immediately tried to contact the B-52. They were not successful. They tried steadily for five minutes. Then a Navy Neptune patrol bomber flying in from Taongi Atoll reported a contrail coming over them on a northeast heading, moving very fast. The Neptune was not able to hold visual contact for more than a few minutes, but they thought they had spotted the B-52. It was holding a steady course and seemed to be under full control. Surface Control then alerted all ships and islands in the immediate area. Unfortunately, there was no carrier near enough to launch jets."

Colonel Griffiths picked up his cigar and puffed on it. It was out. He glanced at his wrist watch.

"We've had no other report since the one I just gave you," he said. "Nobody knows where the B-52 might be at this moment. But we're reasonably sure it's still flying. The bomb was triggered to explode on impact. If the bomber had crashed, the hydrogen explosion would have been picked up on our sensing equipment in the States. No explosion has yet been reported."

"What do they think happened, sir?" somebody asked.

"Nobody's sure. The theory is that they got an explosive decompression in their dive. The pilots are very probably dead and the plane is flying on automatic pilot."

"But they'd have been wearing emergency pressure suits, wouldn't they, sir?"

"I assume they would. A T-One suit is standard operating practice for the airplane."

Nobody said anything. Then Griffiths briefed them. He said the estimated course of the runaway bomber could bring it over the coast of Oregon near Cape Blanco. It had fuel for a much longer flight. It would be deep inside the United States before it crashed from fuel exhaustion. B-36 recon planes had been dispatched from Travis AFB to fly west in a line formation. They would provide an effective warning net. As soon as they picked up the B-52—assuming it was still flying—they would alert the coast bases. Jet fighters would fly out to sea and destroy the runaway before it could reach the United States.

Griffiths said he did not think the pilots in this room would take part in any such intercept. If the B-52 reached the mainland, it would probably be a thousand miles to the north—well out of their range. "I'm not taking any chances," Griffiths said. "We're arming twelve planes with HVAR rockets on zero-length wing launchers—just in case. But I want to ask one thing: Until we get an all clear, I want you men to remain together in this room. If you have to go to the latrine, an AP will escort you."

There was scattered laughter about the AP escort; then the pilots began talking all at once. Some thought there had been no explosive decompression. It was a communist-plot. Communist agents had hidden in the plane, slugged the pilots, and were probably hightailing it for Russia with the H-bomb. Nobody really believed this, but it made a good topic of conversation. Nobody really could feel the danger. The B-52 was on the other side of the world. If it didn't go out of control by itself, and crash into the sea, some aircraft carrier would spot it sooner or later, launch jet fighters and shoot it down.

Stackhouse's stomach rumbled with emptiness. Buck Kretz dredged a gummed-up chocolate bar from his flight jacket, and Stackhouse picked the tin foil out and ate it. He wondered what Christine and Hank were doing. Hank was probably playing with his plastic jet fighter. You held it and raced the wheels against the floor and it made a moaning sound and emitted sparks from the tailpipe. Buck Kretz had given it to Hank one evening when he came over to listen to Stackhouse's collection of Benny Goodman records. Hanky was a great admirer of Kretz because Buck got down on his hands and knees and played horsie. Hanky was mad about playing horsie.

At ten minutes after eight, two pilots were escorted across the hall to the latrine by the AP's, amid loud offers to pin their diapers on when they returned. At eight-seventeen the line chief reported all planes armed with HVAR rockets. At a quarter to nine a decoded message was delivered to

Colonel Griffiths. It said that the B-52 was still flying. It had been sighted over Bensaleux Reef, 1800 miles northeast of Eniwetok. Checking distance against elapsed flying time, with correction for time zone, worked out to a little better than 600 miles an hour. The estimated heading had been correct. The plane was heading for the Oregon coast.

At nine o'clock, Stackhouse got into a game of seven-card stud with Kretz, Ernie Neuweiler and Major Blackburn, the other pilots in his section. He had a brilliant run of luck. By ten-twenty he was a dollar and thirty cents ahead. It was now very hot and smoky in the room. His head ached and his throat was dried out from smoking.

At ten-forty a siren moaned through the base and stopped outside. There was a commotion at the door. The AP brought in an airman from communications. It was another message.

"Hold fast, men," somebody whispered. "We keep going this way we'll be on Dragnet."

There was some laughter. Griffiths read the new message. Stackhouse saw him lick the corner of his mouth with the tip of his tongue. The laughter stopped. It got quiet.

"The B-52 has been sighted," Griffiths said. "A McDonnell Banshee, flying off the USS Alamo, picked it up visually just east of Hawaii. It was apparently in a jet stream, and very high. The Banshee was unable to make an intercept. He estimated the ground speed of the B-52 to be approximately eight hundred and twenty-five miles an hour. That means the jet-stream wind is probably around two hundred and twenty-five on the bomber's tail."

Griffiths coughed. He cleared his throat.

"As of now," he said, "the B-52 is headed for La Jolla. Its ETA, if the tail wind holds, will be around one-twenty this afternoon."

For an instant there was total silence. La Jolla was on the ocean ten miles north of San Diego. It was only twenty-five miles from where they sat.

"The 52 is apparently gaining altitude as it burns itself light," Griffiths said. "By the time it reaches the coast it may be too high for anybody but us."

Stackhouse felt a small, complex tightening over his body. Colonel Griffiths walked to the front of the room and began methodically to outline their plan. He spoke deliberately, but he did not waste time. He drew a line from the latest contact point directly to the California coast at La Jolla. He then marked their best intercept point on this line. It was about four hundred miles offshore. He explained that he was going to send out three waves of fighters. The first wave would start at eleven, the next at eleven-thirty. The third wave would not take off until the first wave was back. If they sighted the B-52 they would call base and report. The code name for the runaway plane was Agatha. After they had definitely destroyed the plane, they would call in and report that too. Was everything clear?

It was. Some pilots nodded. Nobody had a question.

Colonel Griffiths then explained that they might be able to turn the bomber

around by forcing one of its wing tips down. The last report from the B-52 had advised that the pilots were turning off the rudder switch on their auto pilot. That meant the plane was not being held on any given heading. It meant that if it could be turned back toward the open sea, it would fly off again and lose itself in the vast emptiness of the Pacific.

To force a wing tip down, it would be necessary for the F-100 to fly with its wing tip overlapping the wing tip of the B-52; then bank in such a manner as to exert a downward pressure. It was not as dangerous as it sounded. The air flow around the two wings would be near sonic. It would provide a cushion. It would be next to impossible to make the wings touch, even when they were moving close together. However, Griffiths said, if this wing nudging did not work at once, they were to stop trying. There wouldn't be much time. If they couldn't turn the bomber in a minute or so, they were to fire into it with rockets and shoot it down. The farther offshore the better.

"Any questions now?" Griffiths said.

"If we have to shoot the plane down," somebody said, "should we aim for the engines or the fuselage?"

Colonel Griffiths smiled slightly. "Try the engines first," he said. "You'll have four fighters. Each of you can take a shot, if necessary. I think you can clobber the target without blowing it up in your face."

Then Griffiths' voice grew very serious, "I'm sending you out to man your planes now. Nobody out there knows what your mission is. Don't tell them. If you tell one line-crew man he'll have the word all over the base and all over San Diego County in half an hour. Some of you men have families here. Even if you don't, you have a serious responsibility for the safety of the many thousand people in this area. This news would quite probably touch off a panic of major proportions. This is a serious thing we're dealing with. It's a two-hundred-and-fifty-megaton bomb. O.K. Man your planes."

They went first to the locker room, got into their flying jumpers and G-suits. Then they picked up their visored crash helmets in the hallway and went out to their planes.

Verne Judson, Stackhouse's plane captain, was standing under the nose of the F-100. "What's up, sir? The morning scramble is an hour late."

Stackhouse grinned at him, but his lips felt stiff and unnatural. "Snafu," he said. "You know, Situation normal, all fouled up."

Judson grinned. "I know so well what you mean, sir."

Stackhouse made his walk-around visual inspection of the plane. Then he climbed in and went over his preflight check. Everything checked normal. His fuel tanks were full. His rockets were properly attached under the wings. Over on his left he saw Ernie Neuweiler's crimson crash helmet ducking up and down past the rim of his cockpit as Ernie made his preflight. Ernie was quite a guy. He had long blond hair, played boogie piano, and he told people he had three hobbies. They were, in order of importance, brunet girls, redheaded girls and blond girls. Stackhouse told Ernie Neuweiler to watch out or someday his

hobby might turn on him and clap him in the stockade for life.

Buck Kretz was in the plane on the right. He had lowered his green visor to keep out the sun and was testing his oxygen mask. Stackhouse could not see Major Blackburn's plane beyond Kretz. He was glad Blackburn was leading. Blackburn was a slim slightly built West Pointer. Stackhouse had seen him flame-out once, on take-off, at a hundred feet—and get it going again. He had great faith in Blackburn's cool-headedness under pressure.

A minute or two before eleven o'clock, the first section fired up. It was a thin whine, a hot needle of a whistle, and when the pilots cut in their after-burners, they ripped off sheets of vicious explosive sound that hurt Stackhouse's eardrums. A jet wastes fuel on the ground. The first section moved right out and took off, trailing plumes of tawny smoke. Stackhouse lost them behind the hangar; then picked them up again as four smoke-fuzzed specks climbing seaward at terrific speed.

He warmed his radio and went over his briefing card. He wished he had a cigarette. He wished it was 11:30. He felt a little sick at his stomach and his mouth was very dry. He glanced across at Ernie Neuweiler. Ernie grinned and gave him the thumb-and-forefinger circle. At 11:25 the first section called in to say they were nearly three hundred miles offshore and had made no contact as yet. At 11:27, Major Blackburn radioed Section 2 to fire up. Stackhouse put on his oxygen mask and went on oxygen-and-air from the system. They taxied out and took off, climbing due west. They climbed for nearly twenty minutes. They spread out in a line, with each plane ten miles from its neighbor. The visibility was good. They had each other in sight.

At 11:50 they heard the leader of the first section call base to say he was turning back. He had not made a contact. At two minutes after twelve, a radio voice came in very strong. It was a B-36 reporting visual contact with the runaway. The B-36 gave a fix, a heading and an estimated speed. Stackhouse checked it against his map coordinates. He was very excited. It was hard to concentrate.

He was still trying to locate the fix when Major Blackburn came on the air, "Blackburn to Blue Queen Two. Agatha is a hundred and forty miles away, coming in from the northwest. Join up on me. Prepare to follow me in on the intercept. Over."

The Blue Queen Section rogered. Stackhouse banked gently to the right and added a little power. He saw Blackburn's plane, a small bright speck against the dirty brown haze line that covered the north horizon. The speck grew quickly to life size and Stackhouse eased in on the left wing of Blackburn's F-100. In a moment he saw Buck Kretz and Ernie Neuweiler slip into position on the other side of the Vee. The sun blazed dazzlingly off the metal fighters. Stackhouse pulled down his visor and the world turned dark green. The close-stacked F-100's stood out very clearly when seen through the visor. He could see the flush-riveted seams and read the small stenciled directions put on the flanks for the maintenance crew to follow in pulling checks. He

glanced down at the sea. Directly under him, very far below, it glowed like molten metal in the sun, but the horizons were buried in brown haze. It was like flying in the center of a great bowl of brown dust. He checked his altitude. They were very close to their service ceiling and moving about six hundred and fifty miles an hour. Blackburn was leading them in a big shallow circle so they could approach the target from astern. If they met it in a head-on-pass, they would overshoot and might never catch up. The F-100 was the fastest fighter in the USAF. It was not a moon rocket.

About three minutes passed; then Buck Kretz said, "There she is, boys. Three o'clock down."

Stackhouse looked right and down. For an instant he saw nothing. Then he saw the bomber. It had a high, raking tail and swept-back wings. There was a white star and bar on its flank. It was the B-52.

Blackburn led them onto the intercept heading using a shallow precision bank, and shifted into afterburner. Stackhouse heard it cut in and saw the blue flame torching the leader's tailpipe. Blackburn pulled ahead. Stackhouse moved to afterburner and closed the gap.

"Be careful now," Blackburn's voice said. "The air is thin up here. Don't get the ball out of the center on your banks or you may spin. We can't afford to spin now. We'd never catch up."

Stackhouse felt a gentle buffeting against the stick. The nose was gently trying to tuck under. He eased back pressure and glanced at his Mach meter. There was no sensation of speed at all, but the Mach read 1.1. They had gone through the sonic barrier. They were moving faster than sound.

Stackhouse watched the bomber ahead. It was a curious sensation. The bomber seemed to be hanging dead still in the air and they seemed to be approaching it at a brisk walking pace. As they drew closer, he saw, that it was a very large plane. It glistened like silver in the suit and there was a deep green wing shadow slanting backward along the fuselage.

"I'm going to go in now," Blackburn's voice said. "I want to take a look at the pilots before we do anything. . . . Kretz, take the lead. Hold the section above me and well out of the way. I don't know how this is going to work."

Stackhouse saw Blackburn's plane sink smoothly down above the cockpit canopy of the bomber. He saw it move slightly to the right and hold. Now both bomber and fighter seemed motionless. Then Blackburn lifted his sun visor and leaned over, inside his pressurized canopy, and looked down. He dropped closer, and Stackhouse felt his stomach go tight.

Then Blackburn spoke, "It was an explosive decompression all right. One of the canopy sections is gone. They've got on T-One's, but"—there was a breathing sound, a kind of throat clearing—"black," Blackburn's voice said, "all swollen up. They must have been killed instantly."

Then Stackhouse saw Blackburn's fighter ease over toward the tip of the bomber's right wing. It slipped about a hundred feet farther, then edged back; and they could see Blackburn peering out the side of his canopy, judging his

distance. The tip of the F-100's wing crept over the tip of the B-52's wing. Then Blackburn began bringing it down. It was a delicate, expert bit of flying. The two wings came very close. They seemed almost to touch. The bomber's right wing sagged slightly and its heading changed a few degrees to the right. Blackburn held close. The bomber's wing came down a little more.

Then Blackburn's F-100 flipped over on its back, away from the bomber, snap-rolled and fell into the abyss in a slow gyration. Seconds passed. Blackburn called them, "I'm out of my spin at twenty-seven thousand. It's no use trying that wing routine. The air is too thin up there. You put too much load on your wing and it spins you. Blast her. Do it now. We're almost three hundred miles from San Diego."

"Oh, roger, Major Blackburn," Buck Kretz's voice said. There was a pause. Then Kretz spoke again, "Kretz to Blue Queen Two. I'm going to climb up above and make a pass. Stay clear until I break off. If I miss, Stackhouse goes next. Then Neuweiler. Got that?"

Stackhouse heard Neuweiler roger in. He heard himself roger. Then he saw Kretz's plane slide backward and upward. It was necessary to gain altitude and fire the rockets from above, thus avoiding any debris that might fly out of the target and be whipped backward. But it was a ticklish thing. The F-100 was right at its top ceiling. The controls were mushy in the thin air. The plane responded sluggishly, and trembled on the edge of a stall, even in level flight.

Kretz's fighter slowly shrank to a stubby silver arrowhead above against the dark green sky. He seemed to be taking a very long time to gain the necessary altitude. Then Stackhouse saw Kretz tip the fighter forward and come smoking down. It was a beautiful pass. Kretz held his rockets until he was sure. Then he touched them off in salvo. Four bright streaks flicked from under his wing, the bomber's right outboard pod vanished in a ball of flame, and Kretz was trying to get out of the run. The fighter plunged downward in mushing flight, stalled and snapped over on its back. It struck the bomber's wing, bounced free and exploded.

The B-52 flew off in a stricken downward spiral to the left. In a few seconds it rolled over on its back and began its death spin. Smoke and flame trailed from the smashed wing.

Stackhouse spoke into his mask mike, "Hello, Base. This is Blue Queen Two. Agatha is finished. Agatha is going down out of control. Do you read that?"

Very faintly, through the harsh rush of the high-volume tuning, he heard a voice say, "Roger, Blue Queen Two. Understand Agatha is going down out of control. What is your present position?"

Stackhouse did not give the position. He was crying. He flipped his visor up and knuckled the tears out of his eyes above the rubber bulge of the oxygen mask. *Buck*, he thought. *So long, Buck, you red-faced son.*

Ernie Neuweiler's voice said, "Stack. Hello, Stack. You all right, boy?"

He glanced right. Ernie was tucked in on his wing, visor up, looking over at

him. He said, "I'm O.K. Let's get the hell out of here."

They were down to forty-five thousand feet, traveling at Mach 1.1, when the hydrogen bomb exploded. There was no sound. There was a very strong, steady white light that threw their silhouettes sharply in front of them on the instrument panels. The white light held for about three seconds. Then it changed to sunset orange. Stackhouse twisted in his seat and looked back. A dome of fire quivered behind like a mound of gelatin on the surface of the sea. It seemed about five miles high and covered most of the distant horizon. As he watched, the dome shivered and broke up like fireworks into floating flakes of purple, blue, crimson and pink. A soft chocolate-colored cloud of smoke billowed outward and upward. Then the explosion broke up in a multitude of billows and flashes and the whole western sky was a dark, murky caldron. It all happened in eerie silence. There was no shock wave. The fighters were moving too fast for either sound or shock to catch them and they had a long lead. The cloud receded in the distance behind the watery rim of the world.

Stackhouse thought suddenly of Christine and Hanky. He wondered if they were all right. He was pretty sure they were. Christine did not panic easily. He was sure she would do the wise thing—stay home. She could hardly do anything else. He had taken the car to work in the morning.

He glanced backward. The H-bomb cloud was rising and spreading out horizontally like a mammoth umbrella, but it did not look so fearsome now. It just looked like a big cloud of brown smoke very far away. The deadly radioactive fall-out from the cloud probably would not reach the coast. The intercept had been nearly three hundred miles offshore. Very probably nobody on the beach would even hear the explosion. Certainly they wouldn't hear it in the busy streets of downtown San Diego.

Stackhouse thought of Buck Kretz. Then he put Buck out of his mind. He looked ahead in front of the jet's nose. On the distant horizon there was a low black line. It was the land. In another few minutes he would be there. Suddenly he felt tired. His stomach felt empty and his head ached. But mostly he was tired—very tired.

Murder in the Sky

I tapped on the slatted door in the Princess Hotel in Bangkok and Maj. George Teller's husky, high-pitched voice said, "Come in, friend. It's not locked."

Teller was sitting on the bed in shorts, eating fresh pineapple with a penknife. He was a big man around forty years old, with a gray crew-cut, a broken nose and a build like a heavyweight fighter. He was tanned, except for the gray burn scar on his left cheek.

He said, "Sit down, Phil. Have some pineapple."

"It's past three, skipper. We're forty miles from the field. We've got to eat breakfast and have our wheels up by six-hundred."

"You eat breakfast, pal," Teller said. "I'll stick with pineapple."

"What's the matter—weak stomach?"

Teller grinned. "I love the Siamese like brothers, but I can't seem to get used to their cooking habits." He laid the knife and pineapple on the dresser beside a jumble of trinkets and bright cloth. Then he slipped off the bed, moving loosely and quickly, like a fighter. "Gotta shave. Be with you in three minutes."

"Right," I said. "I'll just take a reading on your loot."

"Check that silver pin, Phil. The one shaped like a Siamese dancing girl. Tell me how you think Dusty'll react to that item."

I rummaged through the stuff on the dresser: a bracelet set with a little hunk of carved jade, some crazy beads, a bright crimson sari. Major Teller and I fly the Military Air Transport run between Haneda Air Base, outside Tokyo, Japan, and the Dhahran Air Field, Saudi Arabia. It's called the Embassy Run because our MATS C-54 services embassies in Manila, Saigon, Bangkok, New Delhi and Karachi, coming and going. We'd been out. Now we were on the way back. At this point in the trip we'd usually managed to accumulate a few odds and ends for wives or girl friends. The Embassy Run was a shopper's paradise.

I found the pin that resembled a Thai dancing girl. "A sharp item," I called to Teller.

"Think Dusty'll like it?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

Dusty was Teller's wife. I'm no good at describing women, but maybe you've seen this Joanie Gilbert in the movies or TV—real haughty-type doll, dark, full, sexy mouth, kind of hollow cheeks, knows how to wear clothes. Well, Dusty Teller was a stand-in for Gilbert, and she was big money and big

influence to boot. Somebody said her father was a senator or some other kind of wheel, and when he picked up the telephone in Washington people listened to what he had to say. The grapevine had it that Dusty's old man had got George Teller transferred out of the Tactical Air Command, where he was running a fighter group, into the left-hand seat of a Military Air Transport C-54.

Dusty was ambitious, having a father like that. She wanted George to have those general's stars, and she didn't want to wait around half her life in the process. Fighters were fun, Dusty said, when an officer was young. But they were kid stuff, really. If an officer really wanted to get anywhere he had to move into multi-engine, and then, as fast as possible, out of the air and onto a desk in one of the larger Pentagon offices. Dusty was all for George—or so the grapevine reported.

I wasn't so sure. There's a little Japanese garden between the Bachelor Officers' Quarters and the club at Haneda AFB. I'm single and I room in the BOQ, and I have to walk through that little garden to get over to the club. One night late, when I was coming back to quarters, I happened to notice a dark silhouette outlined dimly against the hangars across the street. I slowed down a little and took a good look. The silhouette was a man and a woman. I was almost to the exit when a car came around the corner suddenly and flung a bright glare of headlights into the garden. It lit the two people for a split second, and I got a vivid image of their faces. One was Dusty Teller. She had her arm around the man's neck and her head was a little back and her eyes were shut and there was lipstick smeared around her mouth. I didn't know the officer's name. I'd seen him once or twice around the club. I think he was on temporary duty from Washington.

Maybe I should have mentioned it to Teller, but in the Air Force you don't. The Air Force is like any other military deal. The guys bat around all over the world, and they get lonely, and they aren't monks or saints, no use trying to kid anyone. Wives are just as human as their guys. So Dusty Teller kissed a colonel on TDY. So maybe George kissed a WAC in Karachi, for all I know. Marriages are sometimes like airplanes—when they get a little rough, you just take your hands off the controls and pretty soon they smooth out again.

I didn't blame Dusty Teller for a thing until I found out how George felt about MATS—and then I began to think maybe she'd been hurting the guy deep down where he lived. Teller and I were sitting in the Maiden's Hotel bar in Delhi when a couple of ancient-looking RAF types wandered in and ordered gin and tonic. I noticed them watching Teller and whispering to each other, and finally one of them walked over to our table.

"Pardon me, major," he said to Teller. "Aren't you the American chap who flew Spitfires at Biggin Hill during the Battle of Britain?"

Teller looked up. "Same chap," he said. Then suddenly he stood up. "Shields!" he yelled. "Old Lieutenant Shields!"

Old Lieutenant Shields' eyes lit up and he smiled in a funny way, and they

shook hands and yelled to Old Lieutenant Somebody-or-other, the other RAF type, and we were one big happy family. The British officers were fighter pilots, of course, and we started fighting the Battle of Britain, battle by battle, with the help of flat palms and gin and tonics.

Frankly, at the beginning, I couldn't have cared less. I've heard maybe a thousand air battles described at one time or another in my Air Force career, but after a while I actually began to take an interest. I'd never heard the story of the taxicab steering wheel that hangs over the door to the bar at Biggin Hill RAF station. It was given to Sailor Malan by a London cabby on the night the RAF chaps celebrated the one thousandth Biggin Hill kill. When the champagne stopped popping and the pretty girls were all well kissed, the pilots trooped out of the London hotel into the early-morning streets, and were amazed to find a long line of taxi-cabs waiting for them. Usually, at that hour, the streets were deserted. Hop in, gentlemen, the cabbies said, and they'd make a procession back to the airfield.

When the pilots finally reached their quarters, Sailor Malan, who was Wingco at Biggin Hill, asked his cabby how much it would be. His cabby, speaking for the lot, said, "Not a stinkin' bob, guvner." Then the other cabbies started tooting their horns and cheering, and Malan's cabby, in an excess of excitement, somehow removed his steering wheel and gave it to Malan for a keepsake.

You'd think the steering wheel was made of solid gold studded with diamonds, to hear those RAF types tell about it. Old Lieutenant Shields kept explaining to me, "You have to know the London cabby, captain. One can't really appreciate the story unless one knows the London cabby."

"What's with the London cabby?"

"He's the thriftiest bloke alive," Shields said. "Wouldn't drive you around the square—wouldn't even open the door—unless you paid him. See what I mean, captain?"

"Sure," I said.

I happened, at that moment, to catch a glimpse of George Teller's eyes. They were different than I'd ever seen them. He was looking at this Shields guy, and I know he didn't know I was alive. It was kind of like he'd been away someplace for a long time and now he was back home. Real screwy.

Then they got on the Nazis and what kind of pilots they were, and what their toughest fights had been. Ron Shields had flown Spits, he said, and he'd been up against the lot of them at one time or another, and it was his opinion that one of Hitler's better chaps in a Focke-Wolf 190 was just about as troublesome a situation as a chap might expect to find anywhere.

George Teller fingered his left cheek, where the burn scar was. He grinned. "Amen," George said.

"An F-W clobbered you, didn't it, Teller?" Shields said.

"I still say," Teller said, "that it was being flown by Baron von Richthofen's illegitimate grandson."

They all laughed very loudly. Then Shields said, "You got a few, though, didn't you, George?"

"A few," Teller said.

Shields turned to me and winked. "George is a modest chap," Shields said. "You know how many Nazis he got?"

"No," I said. I hadn't known, until that moment, that Teller had got any.

"Eighteen," Shields said. "I'm surprised he never told you."

Major Teller came out of the bathroom rubbing shaving lotion into his chin. "Thanks for waiting, Phil. I'll hop into my clothes and we'll go get that Siamese breakfast for you."

We paid our bill at the desk and went out on the street in front of the hotel. It was cool and dark in the early morning and our passengers were standing beside the USAF bus with their hand luggage, waiting to get in. The madhouse traffic of *samlors* which pedaled through the streets at breakneck speed in the daytime was gone. A Siamese boy and girl were wandering down the street from the Chez Eve Restaurant, arm in arm. It was nice to see them. Anybody who's been to Bangkok will tell you the same thing. They are crazy about the Siamese people. The Siamese are a happy, smiling people. Their national slogan is "*Mi pen ri*," which, liberally translated, means, "We couldn't care less." Personally, if the communists ever start pushing the Siamese around, and the call goes out, I won't be hard to find.

It was drizzling rain when we reached Bangkok's Don Muang Airport. We ate breakfast in the terminal and then went right out to the aircraft and loaded. We had some classified mail for the Far East Air Force HQ in Tokyo, a couple of large boxes of Bangkok silver for the Air Force Exchange at Clark Field, and five or six assorted passengers —some enlisted men on recreation leave, a civilian engineer on Air Force orders, and an Air Force nurse who was going to Haneda for permanent duty. The nurse's name was Audrey Knapp. She had a mane of sunburned hair, full, sulky-looking lips, freckles and a cute little trace of a double chin. Audrey Knapp would never get into a model agency, but there are still a few guys around who like their women built to hold in the arms rather than to watch strutting around in fancy clothes. I'm one. I'd been carrying Audrey's suitcase ever since Dhahran, and when we rested over night in Delhi, we'd gone dancing. Audrey felt just as nice in my arms as I'd thought she would, and I hoped to see a lot of her at Haneda.

Major Teller is a very businesslike guy in the left-hand seat. He read off the check list, very GI, and I touched the items with my fingers and Rogered. We fired up the four engines, taxied down to the end of the runway and took off through the rain. It was very murky and we had to go on instruments at five hundred feet. Teller flew it and I looked down at the blurry paddies that swam under the nose when there was a break in the gray sheets of rain. Even in the murk those paddies looked lush and green, after the scorched plains of India, and it was easy to understand why the communists had their eyes on Thailand.

We broke out of the stuff at eight thousand feet and took up an easterly heading. Saigon was on our list of flag stops, but we had no passengers or cargo for Saigon this trip, so we filed to overfly it and go straight into the P.I. This suited me. Saigon was no fun any more. It was now completely surrounded by barbed wire, and when the French railroad left town, it pushed a flatcar ahead to set off any mines which might be buried in the roadbed. They lost a lot of flatcars that way, but it was cheaper than losing engines.

About an hour out of Bangkok we began to run out of the stuff and the weather got clear and hot. We were at nine thousand now, and looking down, you could see the jungle, like a big dark-green shag rug. The jungle between Bangkok and the Indochinese border is one of the wildest and mos* savage in the world.

I noticed somebody standing at my elbow in the jump-seat position, looked over my left shoulder and saw Audrey Knapp. She was looking at me. Our eyes held just a fraction of a second, and I felt my wrists and elbows get light. Audrey wrinkled her nose and smiled. She had one crooked tooth, and somehow it made the others look whiter and prettier. You can't hold a conversation in the cockpit of a C-54 without yelling.

I leaned back and yelled, "Want to sit up here a minute?"

Audrey nodded enthusiastically.

I spoke into the intercom, "Major Teller, O.K. to let my girl sit in the copilot's seat for a minute?"

"Sure, Phil," Teller said into the intercom. "Bring your little friend up, and go back aft and sack out. I'll take care of everything."

"Thank you very much, sir," I said. "I'm not sleepy."

I squeezed out of the copilot's seat and helped Audrey get in. Teller was a good Joe. He showed Audrey how to use the intercom, and then let her take the controls for a few minutes when we passed over that big lake in Indochina where the natives have their towns on stilts miles from shore. MATS frowns on good-looking nurses toying with their planes, but believe me, a lot of MATS planes have been flown briefly by a lot of good-looking nurses, and I don't look for any changes in the near future. If a girl isn't silly or jittery, there isn't a thing in the world to worry about. You can steer a C-54 with finger-tip pressures on the yoke, and it gives a nonflier a big kick to press a little and watch the transport's big silver wing dip gracefully.

Audrey's eyes were big and bright when she gave me back my seat and went aft. We left the jungle and came out over the Indochinese plain, dotted with towns and checker-boarded with fields, with the brown snakes of rivers winding through. We detoured north of Saigon, got back over jungle again, and I could see the coast clouds rising like enormous piles of yellow whipped cream. There was no overcast at all. The sky overhead was a clean brilliant blue and the sun was uncomfortably hot where it came through the windscreen and laid a bright pattern on my chest and face.

"How's our ETA for Clark?" Teller asked me over the intercom, as we

crossed a bright-red strip of coastal beach and bored out over the South China Sea toward the Philippines.

I checked our navigator, Jim Ryder. Jim said we were a little behind time—three, four minutes maybe. I asked Vince LaRosa, our radio operator, if he was getting Clark Field on the horn as yet, and he said it was a little too early, but he'd had Saigon loud and clear.

"O.K.," I said. "Thanks."

When we were out of sight of land, Teller came on the intercom.

He said, "Phil, take a look. One o'clock. Very high."

I bent forward and looked up through the top of the windscreen. The sky was so bright it was hard to see.

"Two o'clock, now," Teller said. "Looks like contrails."

I twisted my head a little and saw what Teller was talking about—thin hairline stripes, almost too thin to distinguish against the sky. I tried to count them, but they blurred in the little wispy whorls which float in the sky when you stare very long. I thought there were three contrails, but there might have been two.

"It's vapor trails all right," I said into the intercom. "Maybe it's Sabre Jets out of Clark."

"No," Teller said, "I know the fighter routine at Clark. This is outside their patrol pattern."

"Maybe it's a gang of swabbies off some carrier," I said.

"Maybe," Teller said. "I think I'll give them a shout."

He reached for the switch to tune a broadcast channel, and I saw him stiffen a little. I looked up where he was looking. The sky was empty. The contrails were gone.

Teller flipped the cabin-speaker switch, and I heard his voice, "This is the pilot speaking. Fasten all seat belts. I say again, fasten all seat belts. Do it now. Make them tight."

I thought the guy had flipped his lid. I said, "Major, what "

Teller said, "Phil, I may be wrong, but I'm not taking any chances. Call Clark Field. Right now. Give them our position and tell them to stand by."

"But, sir—"

"Shut up!" Teller snapped. "Get that call out! Quick!"

I leaned back and asked Ryder for our present position. He must have been monitoring our intercom talk, because he was working his calculator and jotting stuff on a pad. In a few seconds he handed me the slip with our lat-long position penciled on it. The big C-54 went smoothly over on one wing to the left, in a thirty-degree bank, and I saw George Teller leaning far over on the side of the cockpit, looking back and up.

He's nuts, I thought. *He*

Then, past George's headset, I saw the fighter. It was a bright point of light moving across the sky in a slant at terrific speed. I'm no combat pilot, but I've

seen enough movies to know what that slant was: it was a pursuit curve. The bright glint sprouted tiny wings, closed like a dropping bomb, and blue puffs came out of its nose. There was a small, remote, hammering sound and something savage and heavy slammed into our airplane somewhere, shaking the cockpit violently.

The MIG went past below us and I heard his jet scream and watched him pull up ahead in that giant climb they have, with his blood-red nose and his shining body looking like some fantastic red-nosed bullet. In the back of our plane I heard screams and felt a draft that hadn't been there a second ago.

Teller was talking into the mike, "Mayday! Mayday! Air Force transport under attack by MIGs. One hundred miles off the Indochina coast. Approximately off Nhatrang. Mayday! Mayday!"

I didn't see the second MIG coming in, and I guess Teller didn't either. Shells hit our No. 4 engine and set it on fire, and the MIG must have held its fire until it was right in the saddle, because I could hear the sound of the cannon very clearly and see the dark flash of the pilot's visor as he looked at us going past.

Teller yanked the red fire handle on No. 4 and feathered the prop. I got a glimpse of his face. It wasn't screwed up with excitement or squint-eyed or pale. It was very intent and interested.

Through the top of the windshield I saw the first MIG go past overhead very high, on a reverse course. The plane rolled over lazily onto its back, pulled through, and turned into a tiny head-on silhouette directly above. It was an overhead run. I'm no fighter pilot, but I know about an overhead. It's the business. The fighter has you cold. If you try to pull up into him, he simply tightens his back-stick pressure a little and holds you right on the piper—and if you try to turn right or left, he just turns with you.

I braced myself. Teller suddenly pulled all power off our three good engines and shoved the yoke forward. I felt myself pitch into the safety belt and was staring straight through the windshield at the dark-blue surface of the sea. We were in a power-off vertical dive. The water rushed at us through thin wisps of undercast, and we broke through and I could see the individual waves within their faint, lacy crests of foam, and I shut my eyes.

My body slammed down in the seat, grinding my hips, sagging my lower lids and folding the lower lip down from the teeth. The sky went sleepy brown and my hands were glued to my thighs by the terrific G force of the pullout. Then we were straight and level, and I could see the side contours of the waves we were so low, and there was a savage stabbing scream and the MIG went out ahead of us, still in his downward curve, trying desperately to pull out. He almost had it made when he got the high-speed stall. The red-nosed fighter did a quick, neat snap roll at about two hundred feet, flipped onto its back and hit the water upside down. It skipped once, like a fiat stone, and blew up in a vivid flash of fire.

I heard Teller's voice, "Give me flaps, Phil! Ten degrees! Quick!"

I popped them. Teller was lying off against the left-hand window, trying to get a look at the second MTG: I couldn't see the MIG. Then, in my headset, I heard the sweetest sound I'll ever hear in my life—the lazy, bored-sounding voice of a fighter pilot—an American fighter pilot.

"Ah—hold low, Air Force," this lazy, bored voice said. "This is Navy Thunderbird Black Leader. We have your MIG engaged."

I was very proud then, even through my fear, when I heard Teller on the horn. Teller's voice was just as lazy, just as bored as the Navy: "Ah—Roger, Thunderbird Black Leader," Teller said. "We thank you, sir."

The MIG pilot was sharp and he was a desperate kid, but those Navy guys were flying Douglas F4D Skyrays, and the Navy hadn't handed its hottest and best fighters to the students. What happened next was so neat and professional I almost felt as if I were watching an air show.

The MIG came down from the heights riding his Mach number flat out, and he tried to sucker the Navy into the same deal that had killed his buddy—only the Navy didn't sucker. Two Skyrays bracketed the MIG on either side. He did the only thing he could. He tried to turn toward one of them to get his guns bearing. When he turned, the second Skyray slipped into the saddle and shot him. I saw the tracer go in, and something fly off the wing; then a white plume of jet fuel sucked backward, the tracer hit it, and the MIG flamed. I don't know why the pilot never ejected. Maybe those Navy boys put some .50's into his cockpit. They followed down until the burning plane smashed into the sea.

"Phil," Teller's voice said, "go back aft. See how bad things are. Do what you can. Then give me a report."

I tried to Roger. No sound came out. My lips and tongue were as dry as paper. I slipped out of the seat and went back through the crew compartment into the cabin. The passengers were strapped in their seats, white-faced, stary-eyed: some of them had vomited on their clothes, and one of them—one of the enlisted men—was lying on the floor. Audrey Knapp was bending over him. I took one look. It was enough.

Audrey said, "He's—I "

"Steady, honey," I said.

It was funny. That's exactly what I said, and it seemed quite natural. It was like a line out of some corny movie, but it was what I said. Audrey smiled at me. Her freckles looked like flakes of gold dust on her pale face.

I went back and checked the holes the MIG had put in the fuselage. An aircraft cannon shell has plenty of authority. One slug had gone through the row of Mae Wests that hung opposite the rear door. It had torn the jackets to shreds at the far end of the stack, after it had expanded, and knocked a jagged hole in the coffee dispenser and gone right on out the bottom of the airplane. The floor was slopped with coffee and there was a hoarse sound of air rushing in through the hole.

What I was really scared about was the control cables. We didn't carry chutes. If we lost the elevators or the rudder it was going to be quite a

clambake trying to land the airplane. I looked into the latrine. It was O.K. I pulled the access hatch off the tail bulkhead and looked inside. It was dark in there and I had no light. Maybe the cables were O.K., maybe not. I couldn't tell.

Then I thought about the engine fire, and ducked back and peered through one of the round windows past the seat webbing. The engine fire was out. The prop was neatly feathered.

A Skyray fighter was tucked in on our right side—starboard side, the Navy calls it. The plane was really stacked in there. The pilot had his visor up so I could see his face. It was one of those tough, tanned, square-jawed faces you sometimes see on Georgia boys, and I would have bet a buck this lad was from Georgia. He caught sight of me peeking out the window, gave me a big grin and the old "copacetic" signal with the thumb and fingers. I've said some pretty irresponsible words about the Navy in my time, but you'll catch me dead under the bar with a spittoon on my chest if I ever utter another. I gave back a thumb-and-finger circle, left the window and went forward.

"How was it?" Teller said.

"One dead," I said. "The plane seems to be holding together."

"I've called Clark," Teller said. "They're sending the Eighty-sixes out."

The Skyrays turned away when the Sabre Jets arrived, and it was a nice leave-taking. They went to altitude and brought their squadron past close aboard at around 650 miles an hour, and did a beautiful formation slow roll. The Blue Angels themselves couldn't have done a better. In an instant, the Skyrays were nothing but gnats against the aluminum glare of the sea, and then they were gone.

There were fire trucks and ambulances waiting beside the runway at Clark Field, but we didn't need them. Teller set the 54 down and turned off at the first intersection. There hadn't been time for the press to get there, but the commanding officer and a bunch of other wheels met us and yanked us into a briefing room as soon as they found that Teller and I weren't hurt. There were some grim faces around that table. The Air Force is like cops. Cops don't like cop-killers. The Air Force doesn't like hoodlums who pounce on unarmed transports. These "stiff diplomatic protests" which our State Department sends out may satisfy somebody, but they don't satisfy the Air Force. The Air Force keeps mum, but it has its own opinion of your "stiff diplomatic protests."

A colonel was questioning me. "Two MIGs attacked, captain. That right?" "Yes, sir."

"Did you see others?"

"No, sir," I said. "At first, when I saw the vapor trails, I thought it was three, but I saw only two near us." The colonel made notes on a pad. "Both MIGs definitely destroyed?" "Yes, sir," I said. "Definitely!"

It went on like that for about an hour. The colonel had a pad full of notes. Finally he flipped the pad shut. "Thanks, captain," he said. "If we need more, we'll call you in." "Yes, sir," I said.

"There's transportation outside," the colonel said, "in case you want to go over to the Officers' Club and have a drink." He grinned a little. I grinned back.

A staff car was waiting outside. None of your Follow-me jeeps this trip. Major Teller said he wanted to send a radiogram to his wife in Japan, and he'd see me later. I'm single, so I got into the staff car, and for once an Air Force driver held a car door open for me without my feeling he secretly hoped I'd bust a shin getting in. The kid even shut the door after me. He even called me "sir." It was a very rare and beautiful experience.

I'd had three drinks and told my story six separate times to an expanding group of officers when I spotted Audrey Knapp coming in the side door. She'd put on freshly laundered suntans and her face had a scrubbed look and she had on fresh lipstick.

"Pardon me, fellows," I said to the guys at the bar. "I just saw somebody I know."

I pushed through the gang and walked over to Audrey.

She smiled at me, but it was a pretty sad attempt. The freckles still stood out like flakes of gold dust on her face. She didn't look the strongest, right at that moment.

"Put it out of your mind," I said. "It's over. Let's have a drink."

She gave me a forced little grin. "I don't know if I'd better drink anything right now, Phil. Maybe I ought to eat a little something first."

We walked into the snack bar and sat down at a table. I went to the counter and ordered two cheeseburgers and a chocolate malted.

When I sat down at the table, Audrey said, "What do you think will happen? Not war."

"No," I said. "Not war. We will send them a stiff note."

Audrey didn't smile.

"Those MIGs," she said. "Why did they do it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know why they did it."

Audrey ate a little of the cheeseburger and pushed it aside. "I'm sorry, Phil. I guess I'm not hungry."

"Skip it," I said.

Audrey looked at me. "It's not just the boy getting killed," she said. "It's "

"Sure," I said. "I know."

"No, you don't," Audrey said. "I was standing in that communications place sending a radiogram to my folks, because they knew I was on this flight. Major Teller was there, waiting for a reply from a radiogram he'd sent his wife. I happened to be standing in front of the machine when the reply came in. I know I shouldn't have read it, but I did."

"Sure," I said.

I knew what she meant. When there's a message machine working within seeing distance, you read what's coming out. It's a kind of automatic reaction.

"Major Teller's wife left him." Audrey said. "She went to the States the day after you took off on your present trip. The message was signed by the communications officer. I guess Mrs. Teller must have left it with him, in case the major tried to reach her for any reason."

I thought about the silver pin made to look like a Siamese dancing girl, and the other presents in Teller's B-4 bag. Then I thought about the way Dusty Teller had looked in the sudden glare of the headlights back there in that garden. Maybe I should have mentioned it to Teller. That kiss apparently hadn't been just fun and games. Well, it was too late to mention it now.

There was a sudden small commotion outside. A car had pulled into the drive and some officers were getting out. I couldn't see them clearly because of the reflections on the windows. The front door opened and Maj. George Teller came in with a little grim-faced colonel who had a chestful of ribbons. They walked past the snack shop toward the bar. Teller glanced in and noticed Audrey and me. He touched the colonel's sleeve and said something, then came over to our table. I stood up.

"Don't get up, Phil," Teller said. "I've only got a minute. I came to say good-by. I'm taking off for the States around midnight in a B-Fifty. They want a report. You know, firsthand."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I guess I won't be seeing you for a while then."

"I guess not," Teller said. "I'm with some Tactical Air Command people right now." He paused for a second. "I won't be coming back to Haneda, Phil."

"Fighters?" I said.

"That's right," Teller said.

He looked me in the eye and grinned a little. Then he stuck out his hand and we shook. "So long, Phil." Teller bowed slightly to Audrey. "Excuse me for interrupting," he said. "Got to run now." Then he turned and walked quickly out of the snack shop.

Audrey said, "Poor guy."

I didn't say anything. Anything that I'd have said at the moment would have had to be corny, because I was feeling corny. In Korea they'd coined a name for guys like Teller. They said they had "tiger blood." But you wouldn't mention a thing like that out loud.

Somebody put a nickel in the machine out on the dance floor. There was a surge of drums, and a trumpet cut in and began to build softly in the Philippine night. I looked at Audrey. "Dance?"

She smiled. "Sure, Phil. Let's."

Volunteer Assignment

Lt. Col. Frank Bledsoe tossed the chalk into the blackboard trough and let his weight sink down on the briefing table. He was very tired and a little nauseated from the dogfights, and his clothes were beginning to chafe the way they always did after a tough mission.

He said, "You get the picture now, Baker?"

The hawk-faced young second lieutenant said, "I'm pressing them too close—is that it, sir?"

"Don't get me wrong," Bledsoe said. "I want you guys to shove it at me. That's what we're up there for."

He let his gaze move down the row of fighter pilots in the small room. "But don't forget a Sabre jet gets moving when you shove the needle to it. It can fool you. I don't want any midair collisions."

The student pilots all nodded solemnly, and Bledsoe, tired as he was, had to hold back a grin. These junior-grade madmen would "sir" you to death on the ground, but up in the air they'd push a jet fighter through your canopy right into your lap if you weren't careful. Bledsoe knew how they felt because he'd been a buck fighter pilot once himself. He'd never forget that first day he checked out in a Mustang fighter at the Army Air Force Base at Orlando, Florida. He'd climbed out toward Daytona Beach, looking for a Navy Hellcat to bounce, and when he hadn't found one, he'd brought the little Mustang down from the heights, riding the red line and over the field, at 400 miles an hour, he'd slow-rolled it. He could still see the tawny horizon tipping gently on edge, rising smoothly to the vertical, and the USAAF hangars at Orlando swimming above his head, where the sky should have been.

His instructor really clawed him when he landed that day, and for a bad forty-eight hours he thought they were going to bounce him out of the program. They hadn't. He'd gone to England with his instructor a few months later, and after they'd tangled with that elite Messerschmitt outfit who called themselves the Yellow Noses, his instructor had told Bledsoe why he'd picked him. It was partly because of that buzz job, back at Orlando. A fighter pilot who didn't have a buzz streak in him somewhere wasn't worth a hoot. You could tame a buzz streak. But you couldn't put tiger blood in a joy boy in a million years.

Bledsoe said now, to his class, "Any questions on today's mission?"

They looked at him respectfully, but nobody spoke. Tomorrow was their day off. Tonight they could go into Las Vegas.

Bledsoe grinned. "I'm not holding anyone up, by any chance?"

The fighter pilots grinned back, their teeth very white in their sunburned faces.

"O.K.," Bledsoe said. "Take off."

He listened to them banging down the hall; he felt very tired and very old. Up there today, even with his G-suit turned up high, he'd blacked out cold trying to outturn that Baker kid, and there'd been half a dozen times when his sight had gone gray. An F-86 was not really an old gentleman's airplane.

Bledsoe gathered up his notes, lit a cigarette and stepped out into the hall. The walls were lined with posters showing the horrible things that could happen to a jet pilot if he failed to pay attention to the subjects Ground School was trying to teach him. Over the doorway leading to operations was a sign: Anyone Who Enjoys Hard Work Can Have a Wonderful Time in Here!

Bledsoe stepped through the doorway. Maj. Jake Jadow-ski, the Operations Officer, was inside talking to a strange colonel. When Jake saw Bledsoe he said, "Oh, Frank, Colonel Kellogg here has been waiting to see you."

Bledsoe stubbed out his cigarette in one of the sawed-off practice bombs they used as ash trays and straightened his back as he stepped toward Colonel Kellogg. The colonel was stocky and pale and had a small, neatly clipped mustache and wore a senior pilot's wings. He did not look like a pilot, however, except for his eyes. Bledsoe always looked at eyes when he sized up a student. He looked at the colonel's now. They were penetrating and very calm, and they did not shift a particle when they stared into Bledsoe's.

"I'm happy to meet you, sir," Bledsoe said. "What can I do for you?"

"I've set up a meeting in one of the projection rooms,"

Kellogg said. "We're all there except you, Bledsoe. I'd like you to step in, if you don't mind."

"Be happy to, sir."

The projection room was more than half full of pilot officers when they entered, and Kellogg closed the door. Bledsoe knew everyone present. They were squadron leaders and flight instructors, many in flight gear, and he sensed, without taking the time to check each face, that they were the best pilots at Nellis. Four of them were Korean jet aces. One, Max Fuller, was a two-time ace—he'd got ten Nazis in Europe and knocked down his five MIG's in his Korean jet tour.

Colonel Kellogg walked to the front of the room and stood in front of the projection screen. He took off his garrison cap and tossed it on a chair. He had a bald spot with filmy hairs on it which moved faintly in the draft from the air-conditioning system. Kellogg looked just a little ridiculous, like an aging filing clerk, among the tough, dark-faced fighter pilots.

Then Kellogg began to speak in an easy conversational voice, without gestures. He wanted to orient them briefly, he said, before stating the purpose of the meeting. In the first place, it was not a casual meeting, pulled together on the spur of the moment. Each man in this room had been carefully investigated over a period of months. Each man's service record—in fact, his whole life—had been examined. Only men who fulfilled very special requirements had been selected to be in this room. Kellogg said he did not wish to flatter anyone. He simply wanted them to hear what he had to say, and think about it seriously, because it was important.

There had been some restlessness at the beginning of the colonel's remarks; some foot shuffling, chair shifting and lighting of cigarettes. Now these sounds had stopped. The audience was very quiet.

"I am here to get volunteers for a special mission," Colonel Kellogg said. "For security reasons I can't tell you anything more specific than that. I can say, however, that the mission will involve a great deal of hard work; you will be out of touch with your friends and families for a long time; and if things go in a certain way—we hope they won't, of course—any or all of you may be killed."

Kellogg paused to let what he had said sink in.

"I am not urging anyone to volunteer. There is no pressure attached to this meeting at all. I want all of you to go home and think it over. Talk to your wives or fiancées, if you have them, and reach a firm decision. There can be no halfway measures here. Either you are a hundred per cent in or a hundred per cent out." Then, for the first time, Kellogg's voice lost its conversational tone and grew flat and very deliberate. "This is an important mission," he said. "The Air Force has planned it with care. It will cost a very great deal of money. It is considered to be the most important mission—as far as USAF is concerned—in the total United States war plan. You have three days to think about it. I want to see every man who wishes to volunteer in this room at 0800 Thursday morning."

Dottie Bledsoe was standing in the kitchen of the neat maroon-colored Wherry house which lieutenant colonels rated at Nellis Air Force Base, when Bledsoe walked in, having showered and changed at squadron. She had been making sandwiches and had on an apron over a tight-fitting sunbacked dress, and there were odds and ends of cucumber and tomato on the white-enameled sink.

He said, "Where are Bud and Judy?"

"Over at Colonel Willoughby's. Young Buzz Willoughby is having a birthday party."

"Oh. Well, how about a kiss for a guy?"

Dottie was full-bodied and lightly tanned, and her lips were very soft when he kissed her. She always opened her lips when she kissed him, because she said if a girl loved her guy, she ought to kiss him as if she loved him or not at all, and Frank Bledsoe never could kiss Dottie without getting a little lightheaded and weak in the knees; when he told her, she smiled and said when he stopped feeling that way about her, there were plenty of men around who would.

Which was not just jetwash.

Dottie Bledsoe was thirty-five years old, but the boot airmen still turned around and looked at her when they passed her on the street. Frank had been married to Dottie for seventeen years, but he was still as unsure of her as the day he asked her to marry him. He trusted her, but he just didn't quite know what she might do next. Frank was a presentable guy, and he wasn't shy, and there had been plenty of girls he might have had from time to time, but he hadn't had any of them. He didn't feel he deserved any particular credit for

passing. When a man had a wife like Dottie at home, he'd be out of his mind to go chasing some other woman.

When he stopped kissing her, Dottie pulled back and looked at him for a moment. She said, "All right, Frank. What is it?"

"What's what, baby?"

"You're upset about something. I can always tell when you're upset, by the way you kiss me. What is it this time?"

"Look," he said. "Could we go in the living room? It's been quite a day."

"I'll be right in. You go in and sit down."

He sat down on the sofa in the living room and in a few moments Dottie came in.

He said, "I guess you'd better take a brace, baby."

Dottie said, "I've been in a brace since I saw your face when you walked into the kitchen. What is it—overseas?"

Then he told her about the meeting. He described Colonel Kellogg and said that he hadn't been too impressed with Kellogg at first, but now he was very impressed with him, and then he took a deep breath and said he was thirty-nine years old, nearly through in fighters, and maybe this was the type of tour which would set him up for his eagles and a nice desk in the Pentagon.

Dottie sat quietly, and when he glanced at her from time to time, he saw that her cheeks were pink and her eyes very bright. When he'd said it all, he stopped. There was a silence.

Then Dottie said, very quietly, "Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I was thinking "

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Don't be such a drip! You're going to volunteer for this crazy suicide mission! You know you are. Why not have the guts to come right out and say it? You volunteered for Korea, and that test business down at Eglin, and all the other risky deals you've been in since we've been married. I know you so well, Frank. All they've got to do is say, 'This is a big, dangerous deal' and old buzz-boy Bledsoe bounds front and center!"

He said, "Colonel Kellogg "

"Colonel Kellogg! Frank, you're a big boy now. You've been around. You know the kind of fast-talking people they send out from the Pentagon. They pick them for it, Frank. They know just the corny gush you fighter types will go for."

Suddenly she was crying. Frank Bledsoe got off the sofa and took his wife in his arms. He tried to pull her around facing him, but she shoved him violently away. "Stop it," she sobbed. "Let go of me. I hate you." He got hold of her shoulder, and, using a great deal of strength, managed to twist her partly around. He tried to kiss her, but she ducked her head and bumped his lips painfully. Then something broke inside him. He got her with both hands and flung her sideways on the sofa, pinning her head in the cushions. He held her brutally and kissed her on the mouth.

Suddenly she stopped fighting. She looked up at him and put her arms

around him and drew him down. When she kissed him, he felt her shiver, slightly, over her whole body.

"I hate you, darling," she whispered. "I guess I'll always hate you. When do we start packing your things?"

Seventeen officers reported in the projection room on Thursday morning. Bledsoe was in the back row. Colonel Kellogg took all the names down on a pad. Everyone was tense. They all expected Kellogg to say something, now they had volunteered. Not the tipoff on the mission, of course, but something—a few real details to chew on. Kellogg, however, went ahead with the routine matters of where they would get the plane when they left Nellis, what sort of gear they should take, and obviously was not going to give them anything concrete.

Somebody said, finally, "Excuse me, Colonel Kellogg, but could you tell us in a very general way what we'll be doing?"

Kellogg smiled. "I can give you a very fast answer to that question. No, I can't tell you." There was an awkward silence. Then Kellogg said, "I can tell you one thing. You'll have to watch yourselves on security. Security is the core of this mission. If anyone violates it, even in a minor way, he's out. I say again: out! There is no such thing as an unimportant detail in any critical mission. Remember that. There's a case on record where a man fouled up an entire operation simply by telling an enemy agent what kind of paint they were ordering for a certain piece of equipment."

That afternoon Bledsoe took Dottie and the kids on a farewell picnic to the summit of Mount Charleston. Bud was sixteen now, and talked of nothing but fishing flies whose names Bledsoe had never heard; Judy was ten and did not talk at all, because she was wearing braces on her teeth and was sensitive about her appearance. It was hot driving through the desert outside Las Vegas, but when they got up in the pines, it was cool and fragrant and they could see for fifty miles in all directions. They built a fire and cooked hot dogs and drank cold soft drinks from Bledsoe's ice container in the trunk of the car.

Bledsoe pointed out the atom-bomb range on Frenchman Flat to the northwest, and told stories and tried to be very gay—but it fell flat. He had a sick emptiness in his stomach, and now that he had signed up and there was no turning back, he had the ugly thought that perhaps, at last, he had made a terrible mistake. Perhaps this was the mission he wouldn't come back from, and it would be his own fault that Dottie and the kids had to go it alone. Volunteering was different from orders. You expected orders, and you could go out and comply with them without worrying, because that was your job. But if you volunteered and got clobbered, it was different; almost indecent, in a way, if a man had a family.

Two days later Bledsoe said good-by after breakfast. Bud's nose was peeling and he needed a haircut, and there were traces of grime under his finger-nails. Normally Bledsoe would have braced him for it, but now he took Bud's hand. "You're the man around here now, son. Take care of it, will you?"

Bud's hand gripped his hard. "Yes, sir, dad! I sure will!"

When he kissed Judy in the kitchen, she kept her lips in a firm tight line to hide the braces. He kissed Dottie good-by in the living room, and started to go; then he turned and held her very tight and kissed her very hard. Then he walked quickly through the front door and down the walk and turned right toward the bus stop. He did not look back.

In the afternoon, Colonel Kellogg and the seventeen volunteer pilots loaded baggage into a C-47 and took off toward the south. The sun was setting when the transport let down over some mountains into a wide flat valley, and landed on what had apparently been a World War II Army field. Tufts of dry grass sprouted through the crevices in the concrete, and the olive-drab paint on the barracks was bleached a raw yellow by years of sunshine. A line of helicopters stood on the hardstand. The hangars were full of maintenance equipment, and there was fresh green antiglare glass in the control tower. A bus took them to Bachelor Officers' Quarters. The BOQ was already partly occupied by strange officers who had arrived earlier. There were two officers in Lieutenant Colonel Bledsoe's room: a slim, dark-haired captain with a serious face and deep-set eyes; and a tanned, rangy major with a mane of sunburned hair who was smoking a cigar.

"Hello," Bledsoe said. "I'm Bledsoe. I guess we're going to be roommates."

"How do you do, sir?" the dark captain said. "My name is Strickland."

Bledsoe shook his hand. "Glad to know you, Strickland."

The major did not take the cigar out of his mouth. He thrust out his hand and took Bledsoe's in a powerful grip. "Dave Lynch, sir."

Bledsoe recognized him.

"Pleased to meet you, Lynch. Correct me if I'm wrong. You led the Silver Sabres for a while, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I saw you fly once," Bledsoe said. "Detroit, I believe it was. Good show."

"Thank you, sir."

Bledsoe put his B-4 bag beside a cot, feeling as he hadn't felt since cadet days—alert, a little antagonistic, and— he might as well admit it—nervous. He had the rank, but he was pretty sure that rank wasn't going to cut much ice in this show.

In sixteen years of military service, Bledsoe had shared many rooms with transient officers, and he had developed a shorthand method of judging character without asking a lot of questions. You could tell a lot about a man by the items he put on his dresser, by the way he took care of his fingernails, by the magazines he brought in from the PX. Young Captain Strickland was placing a silver-framed picture on his dresser. It was a picture of a handsome older woman, probably Strickland's mother, and there was an inscription on it which Bledsoe could not read at that distance. He saw a book lying amid the neatly packed items of Strickland's bag: *Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. He noted that Strickland's shaving kit was made of expensive pigskin, that there

were lacquered wooden shoe trees inside the shoes under Strickland's cot, and that Strickland's face, in repose, had vertical Unes cleft deeply between the eyes. It was a pale face, and it did not look happy. If Bledsoe had seen this officer in other circumstances, without wings on his blouse, he would never have taken him for a pilot. Strickland looked more like a student or an artist.

Dave Lynch had stretched out on his cot and was reading a pocket book by Mickey Spillane, titled *One Lonely Night*. From time to time he lifted the cigar out of the ash tray beside him, took a deep inhale and replaced it, not looking at the tray. Lynch's body was completely relaxed and it was obvious his mind was down in some alley with Mike Hammer among the gun smoke and sexy ladies. Lynch, Bledsoe thought, would probably make a good combat wingman. A man like Lynch very rarely clanked up, because he lived from minute to minute. When he was up at 40,000 looking for MIGs, he was strictly looking for MIG's. When he got back in the sack he forgot all about MIG's and read gangster yarns and couldn't care less. If this was going to be some kind of a combat deal, Bledsoe was glad to have Lynch along. He was not so sure, at this moment, about Capt. Lloyd Strickland.

Colonel Kellogg called them together in the base auditorium the following morning, introduced them to their instructors, and handed out schedules. Kellogg said there would be ground school each morning, flying in the afternoon. They had a two-hour break after 1700 to visit the bar and have chow. Kellogg said he would not advise them to go too heavy on the bottle because as soon as the program got rolling there would be night work, flying and study.

Lieutenant Colonel Bledsoe had trouble with the helicopters right from the start. He had expected it would be fairly simple to transition from an aircraft which moved 650 miles an hour into one which merely hovered in one spot, but it wasn't. He had to build up a whole new set of reflexes to handle the helicopter: it was like learning to fly all over again. Also, in spite of himself, Bledsoe was let down by the way things had turned out. He didn't particularly like helicopters and he didn't particularly like taking orders from a young kid instructor with second lieutenant's bars. He began to wonder if Dottie hadn't been right. Maybe this Kellogg had sold them a bill of goods after all. Upon several occasions, when his instructor had been a little quick with criticism, Bledsoe had very nearly put him in his place. He hadn't—quite.

He was glad he hadn't, as things turned out. In the middle of the second week of flying, Colonel Kellogg called them together for a special meeting in the auditorium. The blinds were drawn and a motion-picture projector set up.

Kellogg came right to the point. "I have an unpleasant announcement to make," he said. "Our program has suffered its first casualty. It has become necessary to drop one of the officers from training."

Conversation stopped dead. The student officers shifted uneasily, then sat still, looking at Kellogg.

"I will make a full comment in a few minutes," he said. "Turn out the lights

back there now, please, and show the movie."

The projector whirled and there was a short sequence of dazzling brightness and a jumble of numbers on the screen as the film leader took up—then they saw the Officers' Club bar. The lighting was poor and the film was full of snow effect, but it was quite possible to identify some of the officers in the bar as men who now sat in the audience.

"You will notice that this picture was taken in the bar on this base," Kellogg said in the darkness. "It was photographed by a camera concealed behind the bar. A section of the regular mirror was taken out and replaced by a special transparent one-way mirror, and the recording camera was mounted behind that section."

The film whirled steadily for several moments, and nothing of importance seemed to happen. From time to time a bartender unwittingly rose up and blocked the picture with his back as he mixed a drink or served a customer. All of the action was happening in silence, except for the whir of the projector in the back of the room. People on the screen were drinking, smoking and chatting, but no sound was heard. Then, abruptly, a sound track cut in. A voice said, "Not my brand, but I'll take one anyhow. Thanks."

They saw at once who was speaking—two officers on the right side of the screen, in view of the hidden camera. The first officer was handing the other a package of cigarettes. The lips of the second officer were moving in synchronization with the sound. "By the way, I'm Captain Cantler. Clint Cantler."

They shook hands, and a deeper voice said, "Glad to know you, Cantler. I'm George MacAdoo."

There was a pause while Cantler lit his cigarette. He inhaled, blew the smoke out, and picked up his drink. He drank it rapidly, almost to the bottom, and set it down. He rubbed his chin and tapped an ash off his cigarette. There was a burst of sound from somewhere in the bar, and Cantler glanced irritably over his shoulder, then back toward his companion.

"Maybe you can tell me something, Major MacAdoo," Cantler's voice said, and it was easy to recognize the edge of impatience in it.

"What's that?"

"When do we get going around here? We've been here almost, two weeks and they've been treating us like cadets. Not a thing has actually happened."

There was a change in MacAdoo's voice. It was milder, and it sounded sympathetic. "I guess I know what you mean, Cantler. I wasn't going to bring it up myself, but since you have, just how do you feel about this mission?"

Cantler picked up his drink and drained it. He stubbed out the almost untouched cigarette savagely in an ash tray. "Personally, I think it's a crock! I had a real fat-cat deal cooking out in the Pacific when this joker—what's his name?—Kellogg, shows up and gives us this big sales talk. The way I got it, we were about to win the war single-handed. Most important project in the U.S. war plan. My naked foot! If I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd

have stuck where I was."

"Where was that?"

"Little island called Nikko Shima," Cantler said. "South of Okinawa about a hundred miles. You've probably never heard of it."

"Nikko? Sure I've heard of it. You've got F-89 Scorpions out there."

"No, we haven't. They've got Scorps on Okie. We've got F-86 dogs."

"You mean the ones with radar?"

"Sure. They got radar and a brand-new rocket gimmick that'll slap the commies into a flat spin if we ever get to turn it loose."

"Oh, sure," Major MacAdoo's voice said; "I remember that rocket gimmick. It's that seven-inch high-velocity rocket they sling under the belly, and "

"Seven-inch high-velocity?" Cantler's voice said. "Major, where you been stationed—Brooklyn? Our rocket gimmick is completely different. It works like this "

Kellogg's voice cut in, "All right; that's enough."

The projector stopped and the lights came on. Colonel Kellogg stood up. "There isn't much point in taking it further," he said. "Captain Cantler described the rocket armament on the F-86-D in some detail, and then told MacAdoo considerably more about their base at Nikko Shima. As you probably have guessed, Major MacAdoo is not a pilot in this project. He is from Central Intelligence, and he used a special sensitive pickup concealed under his armpit to record the conversation you just heard. Now I want to make something clear. This incident does not go on Captain Cantler's record. Cantler is a loyal American citizen and a good pilot. He will go back to Nikko Shima and go on as if nothing had happened."

Colonel Kellogg smiled. "Cantler had only one fault, gentlemen. He was a very talkative young man. There is no place in this program for talkative men, young or old."

They spent a little more than three months in the helicopters. It would have been possible to finish sooner, but they were required to complete specialized additional training not normally required of a helicopter pilot. A complex pattern of white lines was painted on the hardstand and they were required to fly over it, like a pen following a tracing— first in still air in daylight, then at night, then at night in winds up to thirty knots. A special camera fastened to the bottom of the helicopter took a continuous picture of the lines they were trying to follow. This film was run off on the screen during postflight conferences, and deviations were discussed. It was tricky, nervous work, but it paid off. After they'd finally mastered the Jigsaw, as they called it, they found they could do things with a helicopter they hadn't dreamed possible a few weeks earlier.

As it developed, they needed the extra skill they had acquired on the Jigsaw in the next exercise, which somebody christened The Dough Mixer. A circular fifty-foot wall of canvas was erected, and they landed and took off inside it. At

the beginning, the wall had a diameter of 400 feet. Each day this diameter was slightly reduced. Finally they were landing and taking off with their rotor tips virtually ticking the canvas. When a helicopter was revving up for take-off in the bottom of the fifty-foot canvas tank, it was like being in a monster electric mixer, somebody said. The name stuck.

Then a squadron of Sabre jets was flown in. They were vectored out on long navigation hops at night. The emphasis was on strict cruise control and pin-point navigation. They used tip tanks and went out to the limit of their range. It was difficult to step from a whirlbird which you'd been flying all afternoon into a 650-mile-per-hour fighter. You built up a set of reflexes in a helicopter which were dead wrong for a fixed-wing plane, and several of the pilots got mixed up. There were two very close shaves, but nobody was hurt.

They flew in all kinds of weather, and by now they had learned the local terrain by heart. The field had been picked for maximum security. It was a hundred miles from the nearest town, in a valley ringed by high cliffs, except to the south, where there was a pass. All vegetation had been cleared out of the pass. It was blocked by barbed wire and concrete gun towers which were manned twenty-four hours a day. The mountain rim was ringed with the Air Force's new Skysweeper guns. The Skysweeper threw 75-mm. armor-piercing shells at machine-gun speed and it could be turned down and used against anything that moved. Huge searchlights covered the area. They wanted privacy, Kellogg explained, and they had gone to a little trouble to get it. The officers smiled wryly. They had privacy, all right; it was running out their ears.

Bledsoe had arrived at the secret base weighing 185 pounds. Now he was down to 171. The heat was intense, he wasn't sleeping properly, and little things had started to bother him. Like Lynch's cigars. When Bledsoe stepped into the room and got a whiff of cigar smoke, he had an urge to walk over, gently lift the butt from Lynch's mouth and stub it out on his forehead. Lynch himself was getting edgy. One night when Strickland was reading T. S. Eliot's poems, Lynch said, "Say, captain, when you gonna finish that silly thing? You been working on it for months."

Strickland looked up and smiled. "Frankly, major," he said, "T. S. Eliot isn't something you race through in an evening or so. Some people have been working on him for years."

"You don't say."

"There's quite a bit in here," Strickland said. "Why don't you take a look at it sometime?"

"Poetry," Lynch said. "You can take poetry and you

"Knock it off, men!" Bledsoe said. "Who's for poker?"

"I'm pretty near broke, colonel," Lynch said. "How about a ten-cent limit?"

"Broke?" Bledsoe said. "How could a man be broke out in these hills?"

Lynch grinned. "By playing seven-card stud with two very sharp characters named Strickland and Bledsoe."

The episode of Captain Cantler and the hidden movie camera had made all the officers reluctant to mention anything concerning their service connections. But it was impossible to live with people and sit and look at them without saying something. Bledsoe, Lynch and Strickland talked about one part of their lives they felt was safe—their youth. Lynch's boyhood nickname, for example, had been Cotter Key, because he was painfully tall and thin and had an enormous head. He had been born in a little town outside Wichita, Kansas, where his father had a dry-goods store. Lynch swept the store and waited on customers and rang up sales in the old-fashioned cash register. He was a hard-working kid, and when he was fifteen his father called him in and told him if he kept on the way he was going, and didn't start running with the wild kids down the street who were going through a hot-rod craze, the store and its merchandise would one day be his.

"The old man really shook me up," Lynch said. "It so happened I was one of the wild kids in the hot-rod deal—only he didn't know it—or maybe he did. Anyhow, about a month later a guy came through with an old Waco on a barnstorm tour, and hired me to help him sell tickets and swab down the ship after the customers left." Lynch grinned. "The minute I got my hands on that old Ace, I knew this was it. I went and told pop, and he took it pretty nice. He gave me fifty bucks and a new suit out of the window and told me he'd be looking for me back when the Waco deal folded. Pop was right about the Waco. The pilot tried a low slow-roll down in Texas, and there wasn't enough of him and the plane left to cart into town when he got through moving. But I never went home. Not then, anyhow."

Strickland was more reserved than Lynch. They probably never would have got him started if Lynch hadn't stumbled on an article about his father. There were thousands of Strickland families in America, and it had never occurred to either Lynch or Bledsoe that they were rooming with the son of L. B. Strickland. Everybody had heard of L. B., and everyone who read the newspapers was at least vaguely familiar with his rock-chiseled face, domed forehead and sharp, almost savage eyes—eyes, some newsman said, that appeared to have been burned in his face with a blowtorch. L. B. Strickland was chairman of the board of Universal Steel and controlled a string of other, lesser enterprises through stock ownership; he had been a dollar-a-year man under Roosevelt for a while in World War II, and was currently in Europe trying to organize NATO steel production. Lynch was paging through a magazine one evening when he ran into the article about L. B. and was about to skip past it when he saw the old man's picture with his only son. It was not a recent picture, but there was no mistaking the son; it was a younger version of Capt. Lloyd Strickland.

"Hey, Strick," Lynch said. "What's the matter, chum—got rocks in the head?"

Captain Strickland looked up, bewildered. "What d'you mean?"

"Driving airplanes around, I mean, when you could be sitting in the Stork

Club popping champagne corks and dating fancy babes."

"Sorry, Dave, I don't get you."

"You get me all right," Lynch said, tossing the magazine across the room. "Who's that little laddie sitting there with his daddy on the bottom of page Eleven? Is that Aly Khan or is it Lloyd Strickland, Jr.?"

Strickland looked at the magazine briefly and tossed it back. "Do me a favor, Dave. Forget it."

"You kidding?"

"No, I'm serious."

"O.K., kid," Lynch said. "But if I had an old man who had a mortgage on half of the U.S.A., I wouldn't give a hang who knew it."

Strickland's face was slightly paler than usual. "I guess that's the difference between you and me, Dave."

Strickland did not mention his father again, but he spoke of his mother several times, and it was obvious that he had loved her very much. One night when the conversation touched on poetry, Strickland said his mother had read poetry to him when he was very young. She hadn't been corny, though, Strickland said. She'd made you smell it, feel it, see it. He could still see old Horatius, for example, standing at the end of that Roman bridge with his two buddies, turning back the Tuscan hordes with naked swords. Of course anybody knew that three men with swords couldn't stop an army, but when you were fifteen years old Horatius seemed to be quite a guy.

"Who's this Horatius?" Lynch said. "I don't believe I've heard of him."

It was the evening before their day off, and Strickland had had quite a lot of bourbon or he probably wouldn't have given them the recitation. But by the time he got to the point where the bridge was falling and Horatius was taking on the Tuscans singlehanded, Bledsoe was right there on the river bank cheering for the home team.

When Strickland stopped talking, Lynch said, "Baby, you're wasting your time in the Air Force. You should be selling soap on TV."

Strickland's eyes were shining. He said, "It's corny. I'll admit it's corny, but it's kind of a nice thought—one man holding back thousands all by himself."

Bourbon, Bledsoe thought later, could make people act very strangely indeed.

One Sunday evening Kellogg called a general meeting of all trainees in the auditorium. He was smiling broadly when he rose to address them. He was not a speechmaker, he said, and right now he wished he were, because this was a sort of commencement ceremony. The boot training, so to speak, was over. It hadn't been very pleasant, and Kellogg knew a lot of the men must have got restless, but now he felt they would agree with him that it had been worth doing after all.

"No doubt you've all heard of flying saucers," Colonel Kellogg said. He chuckled. "Every third man, if you believe what you read, has seen one

personally."

The audience chuckled dutifully, but the tension was now touching all of them. Bledsoe found that he was leaning forward in his seat, breathing shallowly, so as not to miss a word of what was being said.

"I wish I could offer you saucers," Kellogg said. "Unfortunately, I can't, because they don't exist in the United States Air Force. But we do have a rather neat substitute. I'm not going to spoil it for you. I'm going to take you out now and show you."

Seven buses were waiting outside. They boarded the buses and drove through the base, past the hangars and fuel tanks, to a narrow tarred road which skirted the airfield and angled out into the desert. Bledsoe had noticed the road several times from the air, but had paid no attention. Every base had its network of roads leading to ammo dumps, radar sites and outlying auxiliaries.

After forty minutes of driving, the buses stopped in front of a giant tangle of barbed wire. The entrance to the tangle was flanked by concrete gun houses. In the headlights Bledsoe could see the snouts of 20-mm. cannon jutting from the slits. Two air policemen with steel helmets, Thompson guns and small walkie-talkie radios blocked their passage. Each man's credentials were checked carefully, and Kellogg himself stood beside the guard and examined faces as they passed through. The inside of the wire entanglement was only four hundred feet in diameter. It seemed to be empty except for the bare sand and a few scrubby bushes.

When all the officers were inside, in a tight group, Kellogg said to one of the guards, "All right, sergeant. Whenever they're ready."

The guard spoke briefly into his walkie-talkie. Then he said, "Everyone stay right where you are, please!"

Bledsoe heard a low humming from underground and felt the earth tremble slightly. A dim red light glowed in the dark earth, widened to a moon shape, and in a few moments they were looking down into an enormous pit, lit by a bloody glow. Narrow catwalks circled the pit and there were doorways leading into the walls. A fantastic aircraft stood on its tail in the center. It looked like a V-2 rocket. There was no propeller and no wings. Instead, there was a knife-edged, three-bladed rotor sprouting out of the body behind the cockpit. A ramjet engine was fastened to each rotor tip. There was no cockpit bubble. The pilot's windscreen was faired into the bullet-sleek body. The projectile was jet-black.

"This is a vertical-take-off aircraft," Colonel Kellogg said, raising his voice to be heard in the open night. "It's nothing very revolutionary in theory. Both Convair and Lockheed have announced prototypes of such airplanes. We call it VTO-9. I'm going to let the civilian project pilot tell you more about it."

The project pilot was a jolly little fat man who did not seem overawed by his equipment. He kept referring to the metal monster beside him as the Egg-beater. It did have kind of nice stuff, though, he said. It would jump out of

sight in the blue sky in around thirty seconds, which put the rate of climb somewhere around 40,000 feet per minute. Naturally it would bounce through the speed of sound in level flight, no sweat. But the big deal, really, was the service ceiling.

"You people probably heard of the Lubbock Lights," the project pilot said.

There was a murmur of assent. All of them had heard of

the Lubbock Lights—queer lights in the sky which had been sighted at night, over Lubbock, Texas. Somebody had even taken a picture of them. They were thought to be flying saucers.

"That wasn't saucers," the pilot grinned. "That was a bunch of Egg-beaters. We turned on our landing lights at eighty-four thousand feet, just for kicks. We got kicks, all right. They very nearly kicked us out of aviation for keeps." Eighty-four thousand feet, Bledsoe thought. That was thirty thousand higher than he could push a Sabre jet. It was twenty thousand higher than the highest he'd ever heard of any mass-produced airplane going.

One of the officers said, "What's the max altitude on this aircraft, sir?"

"On rotors alone, seventy-six thousand. When we kick in the auxiliary rockets we can get one hundred and twenty-five thousand easy. But there's hardly any point in going that high. One thing I can promise you. No enemy aircraft is going to get near you if you don't want him to." There followed a quick tour of the pit. It was immediately obvious to Bledsoe that great care and planning had gone into its construction. It was put together like one of those modern kitchens in the magazines, where the slim, beautiful housewife simply puts out her hand in any direction and touches the button she's after. The pit cover worked both electrically and with an emergency manual control. So did the covers of the six streamlined ducts which were necessary to carry off the hurricane blast of the rotors on take-offs and landings. The project officer told them that it was very important to double-check the exhaust channels for complete opening. If one was even partly closed it set up a dangerous turbulence in the pit which might throw the aircraft out of control.

Oh, and there was another thing: you had to wear a T-1 antidecompression suit. The project pilot said he was sorry about that. They'd all go nuts in a T-1. But it was kind of necessary, because if your cockpit pressure failed at, say, 80,000 feet, your blood would instantly you'd blow up like a young blimp and maybe even burst, for all he knew. The roly-poly little man chuckled. Bledsoe didn't chuckle. It didn't seem funny.

"Colonel Kellogg," the project pilot said, "you want me to give these officers a demonstration?"

Kellogg looked around the group, his eyes twinkling. "How about it, men?"

"Yes, sir," somebody said. "I think we'd like a demonstration, sir."

Then everyone suddenly roared with laughter. Right now they wanted a demonstration of the VTO-9 even more than a weekend pass for home.

The project officer put on a T-1 suit and crawled into the cockpit of the 9—lay down in it, really—and lifted his feet up into the rudder stirrups. The

officers went into the pit observation room and put plastic plugs in their ears. The ramjets sounded off with a series of explosive whishes; steadied out in a flat, vicious roar that knifed through the glass, steel and plastic earplugs, and rose to a steely scream. Red-hot needles seemed to press into Bledsoe's ears and his body felt curiously numb—and then, suddenly, the sound was gone. Through the overhead observation screen they saw the Egg-beater go upward like a giant crimson pinwheel, dwindle instantly to a pink streak, and vanish among the stars. Nothing happened for a short time.

Then a voice said, very matter-of-factly, on the radio: "Hello, Jake. This is Elmer at sixty-three thousand. How do you read?"

A radio operator spoke into his chest mike. "Read you five square, Elmer."

"Does Colonel Kellogg want a fly-by?"

The radio operator glanced sidewise at the colonel. He nodded.

"Go ahead, Elmer. The fly-by is authorized. When will you be down?"

"About three minutes."

They hurried up a spiral stair and grouped themselves on the sand beside the pit. The night was clear and warm and there was a sprinkle of stars in the aluminum-colored sky. The only sounds were a motor running somewhere deep in the pit, and a muffled conversation between the guards at the gate.

Bledsoe felt the skin on his neck growing tight and prickly. He glanced at his wrist watch. The illuminated second hand jerked methodically around its pivot. Then, from high overhead to the southward, they heard an incredibly thin and piercing whine. Bledsoe strained his eyes upward. There was nothing to disturb the peace of the stars.

Then someone said, "Watch it! Here he comes!"

Bledsoe jostled another officer and stood on tiptoe. For several heartbeats he saw nothing. Then he picked up the fiery streak coming at them very low, like a tracer bullet, and the sky just above him burst into flame and the following jet scream smashed the ground like a giant whip. Then the flame was gone and high overhead there was a crackling sound as the pilot cut in his boost rockets. A bright blue meteor rose upward through the stars until it thinned and vanished.

A radio speaker on the pit edge said, "Hello, Jake. This is Elmer. I'm up here, boy. All the way."

All the way, Bledsoe thought. *A hundred and twenty-five thousand feet.*

He gently unclenched his fingers. There were tiny marks in his palms in the red battle lights.

"That's about it, men," Keliogg's voice said. "Let's get below now. He'll be back for a landing in a minute or two."

Two aircraft carriers, the USS Midway and the USS Omaha Beach, rode at anchor with their destroyer plane guards twenty miles off Norfolk, Virginia. The Midway's flight deck was stacked with Grumman Cougar jets and submarine-hunter-killer planes with radomes under their bellies. The flight

deck of the Omaha Beach was empty, but Lieutenant Colonel Bledsoe, in one of the boarding launches, knew what was inside her. Her hangar deck was packed solid with VTO-9's. Corrugated-steel drop walls protected them from view. Along the deck edge, gunners in steel helmets manned the 40-mm. quads. Overhead, in the hot blue sky, were the crisscrossed contrails of a shore-based Navy jet patrol. Even in the peaceful waters of Chesapeake Bay, the Navy was taking no chances with those Eggbeaters and the USAF pilots who'd trained for so many months to fly them.

That training hadn't been any picnic, Bledsoe thought. The VTO-9 was a beautiful aircraft, and it would do things no other plane in the world would do, but it would also kill you very quickly if you gave it a chance. Dope off on a landing and let a rotor blade tick the pit or be just a trifle too hasty on your pull-up after a bomb release, and you'd made the final payment on the farm. If you horsed the 9 up too fast, she spun out. Once she started spinning you couldn't stop. You couldn't bail out, either. The rotor was too close behind the cockpit. If you loaded an ejection seat with enough powder to blast a pilot clear of the rotors, you'd also break his neck at the same time.

The two carriers slipped out to sea at night. They took a southern route, keeping out of the shipping lanes. The Midway kept a Combat Air Patrol of Cougars aloft twenty-four hours a day—and held her sub killers ready for instant scramble. In the Sargasso Sea one of the plane-guard destroyers picked up a signal on its sonar and that morning Bledsoe took back every nasty crack he~d ever made about the Navy. When the Midway sounded "battle stations," hunter-killer planes went off her flight deck like beans out of a slingshot, and the four destroyers moved in at flank speed and formed a moving shield on both sides of the Omaha Beach. It was a nice thing to watch. Bledsoe would never forget it. It was a little anticlimactic when no submarine actually appeared.

The task force passed through Gibraltar after dark and headed into the Mediterranean. They hugged the African coast as far as Tripoli, where all the relief pilots were taken off by motor launch. They kept going past Italy and Crete and turned northeast, toward Turkey. When they moved into the Bay of Alexandretta, Kellogg called the pilots together in one of the carrier's ready rooms. He handed out sets of flight instructions—a specific one to each team leader.

Bledsoe's pin-pointed a spot in the North Turkish mountains near a town called Sivas. It gave him cruising altitude, flight time and two radio frequencies. One frequency was the homing beacon he'd follow to the target. The second frequency was for emergency use only. In case both failed and the pilots could not get back to the carrier, Kellogg said they would go out over the sea anywhere and settle in, tail first. Their chances of escape were not good in this sort of ditching, but it was a direct and absolute order.

Kellogg did not make a farewell speech. He simply handed out the flight plans and wished them all good luck. In less than an hour the VTO-9's began

rising from the flight deck of the Omaha Beach. Bledsoe's plane was the fourteenth to leave the deck. He rose at full power to 70,000 feet, leveled off and took up a northeasterly heading. It was sixty-five below zero outside, but he was perfectly comfortable in his T-1. The view was magnificent. To his right he could see the coast of Syria, curving southward like an enormous black scimitar against the luminous gray of the moonlight ocean. Stars burned intensely blue and the banshee screech of the jets had lost its knife edge in the thin air. Bledsoe glanced at his mach meter. It read .97. They were under strict orders not to exceed the speed of sound on this flight, to avoid making a sonic boom which could be heard on the ground.

Over the middle of Turkey he began listening intently for the homing beam. He checked his watch from time to time. He was sweating and a spot in the middle of his back was itching and it was impossible to scratch. This was tight stuff. At the speed he was traveling, he could get out over the Black Sea without much trouble at all if the guy on the ground screwed it up.

Come on, baby, Bledsoe thought. *Let's get this program on the air.*

Then the homer beat in his earphones. He turned the volume down slightly and locked on. He held altitude for ten minutes, then began his letdown, gradually reducing throttle. When he was a hundred miles from target, he reduced speed still further and began to trim for the nose-up landing attitude. Fifteen miles out, he was nearly vertical and sinking rapidly.

He leaned forward then, and began reading from the code sheet clipped to the fuselage at his elbow. "Hello, Jack," he read, over the air. "This is Bob."

He waited. Very quickly, a voice said, in his headset, "Bob who?"

"Bob Hope. What's your last name?"

"Benny," the radio on the ground said. "Jack Benny. We've got a bed for you, Bob."

He checked the code sheet. Ground Radio was right on the money. "We've got a bed for you" meant "Come down and land."

"I'm tired," Bledsoe read off the sheet. "I guess you'd better get that bed ready."

He began to watch his direction-finder needle. It remained still as he approached the beam station. It quivered slightly. Then it spun around and reversed. He was over the homing beacon.

He tilted to the vertical, added power to hold a slow rate of descent, and began peering anxiously into the curved landing mirrors that had now risen automatically up out of the fuselage in front of the cockpit screen. The mirrors were black. He checked his radio altimeter. He had two thousand feet above the highest point of land in the vicinity. He hoped Ground Control knew what they were doing. He'd looked at a relief map of this area and it had seemed worse than the Rockies back home. No gleam of light had yet appeared in the glossy blackness of the mirrors.

He resisted the impulse to break radio silence as the big jet sank lower, howling in fiat-pitched fury—1200 . . .

1100 . . . 1000 A red smudge, like a cigarette inhaled in the dark, flared softly on one corner of the mirror. He stared at it. It lost its blurry shape, became a crescent, then a full bloodred disc in the darkness.

Suddenly the tension went off. He was settling into a pit. He'd done it hundreds of times in training. His hands and feet worked smoothly and he held the red disc in the center of the landing mirror and watched it grow until he could see the walkways and the blast doors; and then, in a moment, he felt the tail casters touch and he was inside. He cut the throttle and the ramjets unwound like a tired siren. Overhead, the star-sprinkled circle of night sky was being shut out by the pit cover, and in a moment the crash doors opened and the catwalks were full of men.

Bledsoe was not surprised when Lynch and Strickland appeared to shake his hand, and he was not surprised to find that he recognized many of the specialists. Sgt. Eddie DeMarco, his radio operator back at the training base, was perched on the railing outside the radio shack, grinning like a baby vulture. DeMarco was one of the ugliest men Bledsoe had ever seen. His face was thin, his mouth was loose and pendulous, and his eyes bugged out as if he were in the process of being strangled. DeMarco was from New York's East Side, and before he joined the Air Force he'd hung around Stillman's Gym, trying to get started as a lightweight. "I hate people," DeMarco said. "I'd just love to be able to half-kill anybody I met. It would give me a comforting feeling."

DeMarco didn't really hate people, Bledsoe found. He was always broke from lending money, and when the blue chips were down. DeMarco was the coolest man in the house. Bledsoe had been in the radio shack one night when DeMarco pulled in a panicky pilot in a VTO-9 which was nearly out of fuel. The next day Bledsoe had asked Colonel Kellogg to assign the sergeant to him permanently if possible. Kellogg, it appeared, had come through.

"Hello, Jack Benny," Bledsoe called across the pit. "How are you?"

"Fine, sir!" DeMarco yelled back. "How's Mr. Hope?"

A strange colonel approached along the catwalk, and Bledsoe turned and saluted him.

"I'm Bin Tate," the stranger said. "I've been in temporary charge here, waiting for your arrival. I'd like to talk to you when you've had a chance to rest up a little."

"I'm O.K. right now, sir," Bledsoe said. "I had a couple of bad moments letting down, until you opened the pit. It's dark out there."

"It's not only dark," Colonel Tate said. "Wait until daylight. The landscape looks like the moon." His face sobered. "All right, Bledsoe, if you feel up to it, come to my quarters and I'll give you the details on what you've got here."

Colonel Tate laid it down quick and neat. As Bledsoe knew, this was the last stop. The VTO-9 was now as close to Russia as it could get—and, of course, it was not alone. There were sixty-two similar pits strung along the Turkish mountains. Each one had four separate assigned targets in Russia.

There were four H-bombs in each pit, stored in lead-lined vaults on special dollies for quick handling. An H-bomb could be loaded, from a standing start, in a little over four minutes. It was expected that all four bombs could be delivered on target because the VTO-9 would go straight up to 70,000 feet and stay there for the entire raid. No Russian jet interceptor could rise to meet it. The bombs could be placed with precision, for maximum results.

Colonel Tate lit a cigarette. He offered one to Bledsoe. Bledsoe took it. When he put it to his lips, he found his fingers were shaking slightly.

"There's only one detail left in the master plan," Tate said. "Our mission." He smiled thinly. "Our mission is to wipe out the Russian Air Force, Bledsoe. I do not mean in a general way. I mean completely—the bombers, fighters, transports, trainers—the whole works. We've calculated we can finish the job in about eight hours after the whistle blows—using VTO's here and in Germany. Oh, we'll miss - a few marginal fields, but not enough to matter.

"One thing the American public is all wet about," Colonel Tate went on. "The effectiveness of our Intelligence. Joe Public thinks we're all dopes, sitting on our hands, staring blankly at the Iron Curtain. Well, that's just as well. Why warn the Russians that we know the exact position of every one of their major airfields? May God help them if they are ever rash enough to attack us!"

Bledsoe felt cold, even though the room was hot. He said, "After we've knocked out their Air Force, then what?"

"We'd issue an ultimatum," Colonel Tate said. "We'd tell them to stop fighting right now or we'd turn the deal over to General LeMay and the Strategic Air Command. We've got almost two thousand Stratojets now. And don't forget, they'd be able to lay their bombs as if they were out on a milk run. There'd be no fighters up there to bother them. It wouldn't be healthy down below. I think the Russians would see the light."

Colonel Tate then outlined the pit routine. They kept a twenty-four-hour alert—three eight-hour watches. Once every watch they'd run off a practice scramble without opening the pit cover or starting the engines. Once a week they would open the pit and Bledsoe would start the VTO-9's engines and check all controls personally, to make sure everything was fully operational. Mail and supplies would be brought in and out at night, by helicopter.

"Is that all clear to you, Bledsoe?" Tate asked.

"Yes, sir," Bledsoe said. "Now for the sixty-four-dollar question: What's the plan for an actual attack, if we have to make one?"

"Project Control will radio you a Red Alert. Whichever radio operator is on duty will immediately push the panic button. The pit crew will man battle stations. Everything will be set for the launch." Colonel Tate paused and looked steadily at Bledsoe. "Now get this straight," he said: "The peace of the world is involved in what you do here. You can't afford to go running off in the heat of the day. Before the launch is made, I want you personally, Bledsoe, to break radio silence and check with Project Control. A special

secret channel will be given to you for this purpose."

"I've got it, sir," Bledsoe said. "The radio operator sounds a Red Alert, then checks with me. I call Project Control myself before we let the plane go."

Tate stood up and put out his hand, and Bledsoe gripped it.

"Good luck," Tate said. "I hope you never have to turn loose with those Hornbys."

"So do I, sir," Bledsoe said.

Dave Lynch, surprisingly, was the first person in the pit crew to give Bledsoe any static. A platinum blonde with a pony-tail hairdo and a Jane Russell development had promised faithfully to wait for Lynch in Long Beach, California. They had been toying with the idea of matrimony—or perhaps Lynch had been thinking of matrimony and the blonde had been toying. Anyhow, no letters had reached the pit from Long Beach in more than a month, and Lynch was going a little ape-sweat. He knew who it was, he said; a certain middle-aged character who dyed his sideburns pale purple, drove a swanky car with real tiger-skin upholstery, and claimed to know Darryl Zanuck personally. The pony-tail blonde was sweet. Lynch said, but she was weak. Wave a movie offer under her nose and she would do a back-flip and land on her toes. Lynch wished he could get back to Long Beach for a day or so and get the tiger-skin kid straightened out.

The hassle which broke out between Lynch and Strickland probably was aggravated by the situation at Long Beach. It happened over nothing, really. Lynch put his cigar down on Strickland's dresser for a moment, and forgot it, and it burned a hole in the edge of Strickland's mother's picture. Bledsoe had not been present, but he had heard about it from Lynch later.

"The guy flipped his lid," Lynch said. "You'd have thought I'd lit a match and held it deliberately against the old girl's portrait, the way he acted."

"Take it easy," Bledsoe said. "Strickland is batty about his mother."

"So what?" Lynch said. "I'm sick of the guy and his poetry and all that high-and-mighty tripe. If he gives me any more stuff, I'm gonna slap some sense into him."

"Hold it right there!" Bledsoe said. "You're not going to slap anybody, ever, on this mission! Is that clear?"

Lynch looked down at his big fingers. He flexed them gently into fists, then relaxed. He looked at Bledsoe and grinned. "Sorry, skipper," he said. "I guess my baby back home has me a little jumpy. You're right, sir. There won't be any slapping."

Bledsoe knew how Lynch felt, because he was a little upset by his own mail. Dottie wrote that Judy had developed a complex about reciting in class at school because of the braces on her teeth, and young Bud had begun smoking on the sly. When Dottie caught him he was pretty defiant, and Dottie had to pin his ears back hard. Bledsoe didn't like letters like that, because they showed that Dottie was jazzed up and irritable herself. Normally she wouldn't

think of worrying Mm with minor home problems. Bledsoe trusted his wife—but she was a lot of girl—and it had now been eleven months. He wished he could get back to Las Vegas for a few days and get Dottie straightened out.

One night when the helicopter was at the pit delivering mail, Bledsoe was sitting in his room, trying to hurry off a letter to Dottie. There was a knock on the door. Bledsoe called to come in. The helicopter pilot came in and shut the door behind him. His face was pale and he was panting.

"What's the matter?" Bledsoe said.

"Colonel Bledsoe, you've got a foul ball in this pit somewhere."

"Foul ball?"

"A spy—or a nosy guy, or something, sir. You know I deliver mail to all the pits. I know I shouldn't have done it, but I marked the pit locations on a map, so I could find them easier. Usually I keep the map right in my pocket, but tonight I left it in the helicopter——"

"Get to the point," Bledsoe said. "Did somebody steal the map or what?"

"Nobody stole it, sir. But somebody looked at it."

"How do you know?"

"It was folded wrong. I always fold a map neat and flat, with just the white part showing. This guy messed it up. Part of the inside was showing, and the thing bulged the way they do when you don't follow the right folds."

"Did you see anyone in the helicopter?"

"No, sir. I delivered the mail and went down to have some coffee. Then I remembered I didn't have the map with me. I ran up to check——" The pilot shrugged.

Bledsoe felt like hitting him. It was careless little things like this which loused up an entire security program—and yet, maybe it was really a break. Now, at least, they were warned. Now they would be on guard. If there really was a spy in the pit, his freedom of action would be limited.

Bledsoe said, "Where's the map now?"

"I've got it in my pocket."

"Let me have it, please."

He took the map and looked at it. Along the Anatolian plateau, from Bolu to Kars, was a wavy chain of little dots, each penciled neatly with its latitude and longitude. Suddenly Bledsoe felt sick in his stomach. The whole VTO setup, the most powerful single weapon in the modern world, lay naked and vulnerable before him. He thought of the man-hours of effort, the hundreds of millions of dollars, the sacrifices, suffering and death which had gone into laying down these pits and staffing them with H-bombs and trained men. If the Russians got hold of this map and knew what it meant, the entire project could be nullified at a single stroke. He tore the map to confetti, dropped it into an ash tray and touched a match to the pile. He poked the burning paper until it was black ash, then ground the ash to powder.

He said, "How many more pits do you have to visit before you go back to headquarters?"

The pilot counted on his fingers. "Nine—no, ten, sir."

"How long will it take to cover them?"

"About three nights, sir, if the weather holds good."

"How long if it doesn't?"

"I don't know, sir. These Turkish mountains are rough going in a whirlbird. We don't have much range, as you know. We can't afford to take chances in poor visibility."

Bledsoe tried to think it through. If he pushed the panic button now, they might never find the spy—if, indeed, there was one. They could evacuate the pit and send everyone back to the States. But if the spy had this map hidden somewhere or had it memorized, he could still pass it on to the enemy. As a matter of fact, the spy could then pass on the layout of the pit, the details of the VTO-9 and a lot of other information which was now in his possession.

"We've got only one chance to make this bird show his hand. We've got to let him think he's in the clear. We've got to give him more rope. If we don't, he'll go underground."

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead and complete your mail deliveries," Bledsoe said. "Don't mention this to anyone. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"As of right now," Bledsoe said, "you and I are the only ones who know of this incident. If I find there's been a leak, I'll know the source. I might as well tell you now. I'll take it as high as I can go, and I'll make it as strong as possible."

"Yes, sir. I understand that."

After the helicopter pilot left, the sick feeling in Bledsoe's stomach spread gradually, like a poison, through his nervous system. Until a few moments ago, he'd trusted every man in the pit. He'd looked upon them as loyal, capable, dedicated guys. Now, because a map had been folded so it bulged, instead of neat and flat, the trusted buddies had suddenly turned into sinister strangers. He might as well not kid himself. If there really was a spy in the pit, the safety of the United States—in fact, the peace of the world—might be sitting right here in this room in the person of Lt. Col. Frank Bledsoe.

Suddenly it was impossible to sit still. He put on his garrison cap, switched off the lights and went out into the corridor. He walked toward the twenty-four-hour combat mess. Passing the ladder to the helicopter platform, he restrained the urge to climb it and look out. He had never done this before. He mustn't now. He mustn't do anything now that he hadn't done before. Suddenly, for no reason, he had a feeling that somebody had stepped out into the corridor behind him and was standing there watching. He stifled an impulse to whirl around. Instead, he stopped casually, took a cigarette out of his pack and let it slip out of his fingers. When he stopped to pick it up, he looked back past his legs. The corridor was empty.

Steady, boy, he thought. You've got a long way to go. Eddie Kasperzak, the

duty cook, was reading a Steve Canyon comic book when Bledsoe entered the mess. Bledsoe said, "How's the Dragon Lady coming this evening, Kasperzak?"

"Pardon, sir?"

"The Dragon Lady. She's Steve Canyon's girl friend, isn't she?"

Kasperzak blushed. "Oh, no, sir. The Dragon Lady isn't in Steve Canyon. She's in Terry and the Pirates." He went behind the counter and poured Bledsoe a cup of coffee. Bledsoe creamed it from the automatic dispenser and spooned in some sugar.

"You want a sandwich, sir? I got some real nice hickory ham."

"No, thanks," Bledsoe said. "Coffee's plenty."

Normally he would have taken the sandwich. He liked hickory-smoked ham very much. Now he could hardly drink the coffee—although he knew it wasn't the coffee. Kasperzak's coffee was famous. It was Bledsoe's nerves. The thing to do was relax and be calm. That was what they always told you in those books on triumphing over nervous tension. Just relax and be calm. Just walk on the water! Just fling up a window and step out on the sill and fly!

Bledsoe finished his coffee and left the mess. Passing the radio shack, on his way to his room, he heard a soft sharp thump. His stomach tightened very slightly and he stopped and stood listening. There was a moment of silence. Then the sharp little thud was repeated. Bledsoe pulled the door open and stepped inside. Sgt. Eddie DeMarco was watching Sgt. Howard Rogers throw darts. The target was pulpy from months of use. Two darts thrust out stiffly from its exact center, and Rogers held a third dart in his hand.

Bledsoe made his voice casual. "Things a little slow this evening, men?"

DeMarco grinned his hideous smile. "Colonel Bledsoe, things in this pit are always a little slow. In fact, I might describe them as having reached a dead stop." DeMarco looked combatively at Rogers. "Sir, this man is a ringer. This here Sergeant Rogers spent two years running a dart concession at Coney Island. When he wasn't barking for customers he was out shilling for his own stand. The guy prolly threw five hundred million darts in those two years. He's so good he can't even miss in his sleep. Now, he tells me! After he's been takin' me over the hurdles for the last six months!"

Sergeant Rogers did not smile. He was a good radio man, very quiet and serious. "Sergeant DeMarco di'nt ask me," he said. "So I di'nt tell him."

Bledsoe said, "Anything important come in, Rogers?"

"No, sir. Just the usual weather and some Stateside news I picked up short wave."

"What's happening Stateside?"

"They expect cloudy weather in New Jersey over the weekend," Rogers said. "Cooler in the north portion."

DeMarco said, "Colonel Bledsoe, you all set for this morning?"

Bledsoe looked at him. "All set?" he said. "All set for what, sergeant?"

"Why, our game, sir. You've got an engine check coming up on the 0400

watch."

"Oh," Bledsoe said. "I guess I must have forgotten it."

Every week he had a little side bet with Sergeant De-Marco about the engine check which it was necessary for him to make personally, as pit commander. All other checks were made with the pit cover closed and the engines dead. This one was made with the engines running and the cover open, to make certain all the gear was functioning properly. When Bledsoe was ready to start the test, he signaled DeMarco by pressing a buzzer in the Ready Room. DeMarco then started the Red Alert siren. If Bledsoe got buckled down in the cockpit in less than three minutes, DeMarco owed him a beer. If it took him longer than three minutes, he owed DeMarco a beer. The pay-off would come at the end of the duty tour, when they were back in New York.

DeMarco said, "I've got a request to make, sir."

"Shoot."

"As of right now, I owe you eleven beers. I think it's time I got a handicap." "What sort of handicap?"

"How about me giving you a shotgun alert, sir? Shoving the panic button when you aren't expecting it." DeMarco grinned slyly. "Could be, if I worked it right, I might catch you—ah—with the trousers at half mast, sir."

Bledsoe smiled a little. It always did him good to talk to DeMarco. DeMarco was as scrawny as an underfed pullet, but he had a heart as big as a lion.

He said, "All right, sergeant. It's a deal."

Outside in the hall, he heard a snatch of DeMarco's conversation with Rogers, not intended for his ears: ". . . proves all the officers ain't jerks, like I said." For an instant he felt good. He forgot the spy and thought about the bar on Third Avenue where he was going to collect those beers from Sergeant DeMarco. —.

Back in his room, lying on the bed with the light out, the tension was as strong as ever. He was exhausted and he needed rest, but he couldn't rest. His nerves were strung tight. Every one of his senses was needle sharp. He heard every move Major Lynch made behind the thin partition on his left, and he smelled the faint rank stench of Lynch's cigars through the air-conditioning ducts. When a pit motor cut in or stopped, there was a sudden tiny constriction in Bledsoe's stomach. He had never been good at waiting. In fact, he'd been lousy at it. In Korea he'd tossed in his bunk on the nights before a strike, watching the windows change from black to gray, his nerves like a net of hot microscopic wires, slowly drawing tighter over his body. He'd hated the nights of waiting, but the days were different. When he was up there in the sun glare, listening to the harsh snore of the Sabre's engine, his guns charged and ready, he was king of the world. Action was Bledsoe's dish. It was easier to face winking wing guns than lie in the dark and stare up at a ceiling and wonder. . . .

Bledsoe's alarm went off at 0300. He got up at once, turned on the light and splashed cold water in his face. His eyes felt gritty and there was a vague, empty ache in his stomach. He put on woolen longjohns, heavy socks, light coveralls, battle jacket and a pair of thick-soled work shoes. He stopped briefly in the mess, smoked a cigarette, had a cup of coffee and a sweet roll. It was 0340—twenty minutes early—when he stepped into the pilots' Ready Room. They always relieved each other at least fifteen minutes early. It took ten minutes to put on the T-1 antidecompression suit over the coveralls. They had to wear the T-1 on every watch. If they got a Red Alert and had to scramble in earnest, they'd have to go to 70,000 feet. At that altitude the T-1 was a life-or-death matter.

Lloyd Strickland was sitting at the ready desk in his T-1, staring through the big double-paned observation window into the VTO pit. He looked like a man from Mars in the bulbous white helmet, the transparent plastic face plate and the mass of lacings which ran up the arms and legs of the suit. The lacings were important. They were what tightened down and kept your body from blowing up like a balloon in an emergency.

"Morning, Lloyd," Bledsoe said. "How was the watch?"

"Quiet, sir," Strickland said.

"Be with you in a minute," Bledsoe said. "I'll just pull my space suit out of the locker here and rattle my way into it."

"Can I give you a hand, sir?"

"Well, thanks," Bledsoe said. "I could use some help— at least with the helmet."

He bent and began working the combination on his locker. He saw Strickland come toward him past the desk. Strickland picked something up off the desk. Bledsoe turned to see what it was. There was a blur of motion and a stunning blow against the side of his head. He fell against the locker, almost tipping it over, and Strickland struck him a second time with the heavy glass ash tray, and the world exploded through dazzling brightness into the dark. . .

There was a blinding pain behind his eyes. Every time his heart beat, it sent a scalding spasm back through his head. He tried to focus on the room, but the room was swimming in jagged lights, and there was a blurry, clotted stickiness in his eye winkers. His mouth was stuffed with something. He tried to swallow and couldn't. He was gagged with a wad of cloth and the cloth was fastened with strips of adhesive tape.

Bledsoe lay very still, fighting the urge to vomit. He couldn't vomit now. If he did, he would probably strangle to death. Gradually, things that were blurred grew sharp, as if a camera had been twisted into focus. There was a coolness of metal against his right cheek. He was crammed in the corner of the Ready Room behind his own locker. His hands and feet were bound savagely tight with copper wire, and Lloyd Strickland was sitting between him and the observation window, methodically putting things in a brief case.

Through the jagged lights in his head, Bledsoe tried to concentrate on what Strickland was doing. He saw him pack an E6B navigation computer and a small, red-backed book. Then Strickland began putting in maps. As he held one of them poised above the open bag, searching for a slot for it, Bledsoe saw a blue expanse of water and the coast line with two towns marked on it. He strained his eyes. The towns were Taganrog and Rostov.

Suddenly he realized that Strickland had paused in his packing and was watching him. The face plate of the helmet was open, of course, but Strickland's face was in deep shadow. He did not look human. He looked like a creature in a science-fiction movie.

Then Bledsoe heard Strickland's voice. It came from far away, through echoing distances, and it was difficult to understand what the voice was saying. It was saying something about a little white dog. The little dog had barked too much in the night, very long ago, and in the morning a man had taken the dog into the garage and beaten it to death with a jack handle. The little dog had yelped, and then it had screamed almost like a person, and then it was just a bloody pile of fur and bone splinters on the concrete floor of the garage beside the shiny fender of the big black town car. Lloyd Strickland had been a little boy then, but he had been there, and seen the jack rising and falling, and the man had been his father.

Bledsoe worked his tongue against the gag, trying to get around it to push the tape off his mouth. The voice of Strickland sounded metallic and blurred, and it talked faster and faster. There was something about a violin which had been burned, and an old chauffeur who had taught Lloyd Strickland how to scrape apples with a silver table knife, and something about elevators in the Universal Steel Company. And behind it all, somehow, Bledsoe had the fleeting vision of a pair of burning, savage eyes, and a high bald head, and he remembered having seen them in a magazine illustration. The thing was, Lloyd Strickland's voice kept saying, that nobody could do anything. The servants couldn't and the old chauffeur couldn't, and the people who worked in his father's office couldn't. Lloyd's mother finally had. She'd gone away to a place where even the great L. B. Strickland couldn't touch her.

Then the voice inside the helmet grew suddenly flat and savage. "I've got news for the old man," he said. "I've got news for the rest of the white-haired boys who push buttons behind desks in that so-called democracy everybody's always raving about. Somebody else is going to do a little pushing one of these days—not buttons—and there won't be anything L.B. or anyone else can do to stop them."

Strickland closed his flight kit. Bledsoe watched him. Outside, Bledsoe could see the sleek bullet shape of the VTO-9 in the dim red pit lights. The lights did not affect the retina of the eye. You could blast out of the pit into the dark without being bothered by night blindness.

Strickland said, "I'm taking the VTO-9 to Russia. I've got the latitude and longitude of every H-bomb site in Turkey. By noon tomorrow everything will

be in the hands of the Russian General Staff."

Strickland leaned across the desk to the wall and pushed the buzzer which signaled the radio shack to touch off a practice Red Alert signal.

There was a long moment when nothing happened. Strickland pushed the buzzer again, savagely. Then the siren filled the pit with a high and steely scream. Strickland instantly threw the switch to open the pit cover. Bledsoe heard a relay snap behind him and felt the wall tremble with the vibration of the powerful pit motor. Looking up, he saw the steel dome slipping slowly back to uncover a star-studded sky. Other motors were running. One by one, on the control panel, six green lights blossomed. They were the safety lights for the exhaust channels. All channels were open. The way was clear.

Strickland picked up his brief case, whirled and disappeared behind the steel locker. Bledsoe could not see him go out into the corridor. The scream of the siren cut off short. There was a sound of a door opening and closing, and Bledsoe saw Strickland running around the catwalk toward the counterbalanced boarding platform. He reached the platform, grabbed it with both hands and pulled down hard against the counterweights.

The platform came down into position, like a drawbridge, on the end of its steel support cables. It spanned the twenty-foot gap between the catwalk and the cockpit of the VTO-9. Strickland ran across, opened the cockpit and wormed his way in, lying on his back, putting his feet up into the rudder stirrups above his head. The boarding platform was instantly pulled up out of the way by the weight of its counterbalances, and snapped into position against the wall of the pit.

Bledsoe heard footsteps outside. A voice said, "Two minutes fifty-eight seconds." There was a pause. Then the voice said, "I never figured the old man for a double-cross over a lousy glass of beer."

"Double-cross?" another voice said. "What are you talking about, DeMarco?"

"I was supposed to give Colonel Bledsoe a shotgun alert this time," DeMarco's voice said. "He agreed to it. Then he turns around and shoves the buzzer on me, just like he always did."

Suddenly Bledsoe was frantic. He shoved his tongue fiercely into his cheek, trying to get around the gag and against the confining tape. The gag slipped and his tongue wedged it in his throat. He fought nausea for a terrible second. Then it leaped upon him in dark racking convulsions. Stomach juices jerked against the gag and trickled like acid from his nostrils, and suddenly he was beginning to drown, and he went crazy. He flung his tight-bound body against the wall and back against the steel locker. The tall top-heavy locker tipped on its legs, held almost on a balance for an instant and fell over with an explosive crash.

From outside, came the first swishing explosions of the ramjets and the pit was lit with a whizzing pinwheel of fire. Bledsoe swung his face against the sharp projecting angle iron which formed one leg of the locker. The sharp

steel cut his cheek and dug against the adhesive. He had to have air even if he gouged his cheek off. He twisted hard against the steel. There was a stab of pain, a lessening of tension, and suddenly he was lying on his side, vomiting through the torn tape and gathering in great lungfuls of blessed air.

The sound of the ramjets gathered to a solid explosion; then began to thin out and climb the scale, and the walls of the pit were lit to a furnace glow by the three motors which now formed a solid circle of fire. "Stop him!" Bledsoe screamed soundlessly into the jet scream. "Somebody! Please! Quick!"

A flashlight probed, from outside, through the observation window. It played quickly around the Ready Room. It touched the bound figure of Lieutenant Colonel Bledsoe and held on him, as if somebody was drinking in every detail from out there on the catwalk. The blazing direct glare of the light made Bledsoe shut his eyes. Then it was gone. Bledsoe opened his eyes and saw a skinny little figure scuttle past the observation window around the catwalk, and race for the boarding platform. He recognized the man. It was Sgt. Eddie DeMarco.

"Get him, Eddie," he whispered. "Get him, boy."

Eddie DeMarco reached the counter-balanced platform. He grabbed it with both hands and tried to pull it down. He was not heavy enough to get fast action. The platform held its position for a moment, and then, very slowly, began to descend, like a drawbridge, over the whirling rotors. At this instant Captain Strickland advanced his throttles and rose out of the pit.

For a fraction of a second, Bledsoe thought Strickland had it made. Then the observation window blew up like a bomb and bits of jagged metal which an instant before had been a cockpit boarding platform shrieked like chunks of shrapnel into the walls of the Ready Room above Bledsoe's head.

The VTO-9 was gone. The pit was full of echoing quiet. Bledsoe opened his eyes. He saw the night sky past shattered edges of glass, and there was a smell of tortured metal and hot oil and raw jet fuel. He saw the VTO-9 rising, a vivid pink circle in the night. The circle diminished rapidly until it was almost a dot, and then suddenly lost its sharpness and began to give off tiny straw-colored puffs.

The rising aircraft fell gently away from the vertical like a skyrocket which has reached its zenith. There was a crackle of blue flame. Strickland was in desperate trouble. He was trying to blast himself into stability by a rocket boost.

For an instant it seemed to be working. The blue meteor steadied a moment and rose higher. Then it began to vibrate ... to weave ... to porpoise violently at terrific speed across the sky. It moved blindly toward the stars, seemed to merge with them, and then, high above the earth, there was a mighty blinding flash of white fire—and darkness. . . .

Eddie De Marco's body was lying at the bottom of the pit. Bledsoe climbed down the ladder with a flashlight. He played the light briefly over the body.

Then he straightened and looked upward. The catwalk was half torn away. What was left of it was lined with shocked and staring faces. Suddenly something inside Frank Bledsoe snapped.

"Man your posts, you stupid fools!" he yelled at them. "We've got work to do! Haven't you ever seen a dead man before?"

The faces jerked back into doorways, there was the sound of feet and muffled voices. Bledsoe turned off the flashlight. He slipped out of his battle jacket, knelt and spread it, very carefully and very gently, over Sergeant DeMarco's face. He remained kneeling a moment beside DeMarco's body. Then he rose, and, not looking back, crossed the pit and began climbing the ladder of the catwalk.

Flame-Out

It was already hot in the early morning when the Air Force bus drove into the Porkchop target range north of Las Vegas, Nevada. The desert stretched away to the ring of mountains and I could smell the sagebrush and see the pockets made by the practice bombs and rockets and there were many bright glints on the sand where the salvage gang had missed shell cases. The mountains in the east were rim-lit with a dull red glow, but the sky overhead was already bright as a blowtorch. It was going to be another typical Nevada summer day—no wind, blinding bright, and nothing but sand and sage and stupefying heat.

But today I didn't care. Today nothing could bother me—not a thing. In eight more hours, after I'd finished scoring the squadron's skip-bombing and rocket hits, I'd be finished with the United States Air Force forever. Tomorrow this time, I'd be a civilian again. I'd have my GI gear all packed up for keeps and I'd be sitting in the terminal at McCarran Field in my new sports coat and the twenty-dollar Western shirt I'd bought in Vegas, with a ticket to Allentown, Pennsylvania, in my pocket.

I knew exactly what to do when I landed in Allentown. I was going to walk into the nearest phone booth and call a certain sales girl and ask her to marry me. The girl's name was Stephanie Boudarakis, and she looked like Gina Lollobrigida, the Italian movie star—only Stephy wasn't Italian. She was Polish, which was fine with me. My name is Frank Novak.

Yesterday had been my last day in the maintenance shop back at Nellis Air Force Base, and I'd spent most of it checking out the new crew chief on the F-86-D Sabrejet. The D, in case you didn't know, is a one-man all-weather interceptor with radar sighting, afterburner and a retractable rocket package. The guys called the 86-D "a blowtorch with TV, overdrive, and built-in

fireworks." She was a honey when you had her on the money. But if the crew chief goofed off—particularly on the electronic engine control—the pilot could get himself in a lot of trouble upstairs.

The pilots in our squadron could get themselves in a lot of trouble upstairs without any help from the airplane. We had the MDAP outfit at Nellis—Mutual Defense Assistance Pact, that means—and we had wild-eyed characters from all over the world trying to check out in this hot jet fighter. Like Master Sergeant Joe Fuller, the line chief, said: "I don't want to scare you guys—but when one of these Foreign Legion boys climbs into an 86 for the first time, just kind of stand back, until you see what's going to happen."

The sarge had something. One lad smiled and nodded politely at everything they told him during the cockpit checkout, and it seemed to his instructor that he had it cold. The instructor climbed down off the cockpit ladder. The pilot reached down—the very first move he made—and retracted the landing gear.

Then there was this British type who looked a lot like Roddy McDowall, who crawled into a Sabrejet, ririewalled the throttle, and headed straight for the hotel-and-gambling section of Las Vegas known as The Strip. He'd promised some chorus queen who worked in a floor show to show her his Sabrejet close up. He did. He was flying upside down at fifty feet, going five hundred miles an hour, when he passed over the swimming pool.

My boy on this last tour was a Turk. His name was Lt. Abdullah Hassan, and I'll be frank, he disappointed me at first. I'd been led to believe that all Turks were big bull-necked guys who wore a fez and spent their nights chasing veiled women around a harem, and their days slicing people up with long curved swords. Lieutenant Hassan laid these rumors to rest. He was short, red in the face, and resembled a healthy Midwestern farm boy, except when he talked. When he talked he murdered the English language worse than my pop, who is an expert. It wasn't that Lieutenant Hassan didn't know the words. He had plenty of words—just a very unusual way of pronouncing them. He called his airplane a Sobberjot and he called me Fronk Nowock.

I'm not the buddy-buddy type, but gradually I got to like Lieutenant Hassan. He wasn't one of these officers who're always afraid some enlisted man will get too familiar with them—but he wasn't slobby friendly either. I guess you'd say he was interested. When he wasn't up flying he'd be hanging around the maintenance shop watching me work on the Sabrejet. Finally, when I realized he was really interested, I checked out a pair of GI coveralls for him and let him come inside and see how it was done. The best way for anyone to learn what makes an airplane tick is to get into it with ten greasy fingers.

Lieutenant Hassan, after I caught onto his lingo, told me quite a bit about Turkey: how the people ate this hard bread and yoghurt (he called it yort); how the peasants lived in mud huts and couldn't come outside at night in the wintertime because the wolves might get them; and how wrestling was the national sport in Turkey, just like baseball and football in the U. S. Little kids wrestled, Lieutenant Hassan said, and young men wrestled. It was wonderful

for building up the body.

One day when Lieutenant Hassan was talking about wrestling, Bugs Linderman, one of the ordnance gang, was standing there listening. Bugs always made me nervous. He was a wise guy, but unlike most wise guys, he could back it up. He weighed around 190, and kept in shape, and he'd recently been busted back to Airman Third for beating up a civilian in Las Vegas.

"How about you, lieutenant?" Bugs pipes up all of a sudden, looking at Lieutenant Hassan and sounding very interested and respectful. "Did you do much wrestling, sir?"

Lieutenant Hassan did not know Bugs, and he smiled at him. Lieutenant Hassan was a very friendly guy. "Yos," he said. "I have wroastle."

Bugs winked at me. He said, "Doggone, lieutenant—it just happens I have wroastle myself. You want to wroastle me a little bit?"

"Knock it off, Bugs," I said. "You got forty pounds on the lieutenant."

"Yos," Bugs said, "but the lieutenant is a Turk. Turks very toff—eh, lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Hassan's face had gotten suddenly very red. He looked directly at Bugs. "You wont to wroastle now?"

"Sure, sir," Linderman said, and I could see he was getting a big charge out of the deal. "If you promise not to report me if I throw you down, sir."

Lieutenant Hassan kept looking straight at Bugs. "I not report."

"Well, O. K.," Bugs said. "What are we waiting for?"

Lieutenant Hassan took off his garrison cap and jacket and laid them on the wing of the airplane. I wanted to step in and stop it, because I knew Bugs was fixing to make a fool of Lieutenant Hassan—maybe even rough him up so he'd miss some flying—and I knew that Major Finnegan, CO of the squadron, was hell on wheels when any of the Foreign Legion missed their flying. But after all, Lieutenant Hassan was an officer, and he was supposed to be able to make up his mind without any help from the enlisted men. I didn't say anything. Lieutenant Hassan moved a little toward Bugs Linderman, and went into a crouch.

"Come," Lieutenant Hassan said. "We wroastle now."

Bugs was grinning a little when he stepped in and made a grab for Lieutenant Hassan. I'm not sure what happened then. Lieutenant Hassan dodged under Bugs' hands, there was a mixed-up blur of arms and legs, and suddenly Bugs Linderman fell very hard on his back on the concrete. Lieutenant Hassan was on top. He made some quick, short moves with his hands, bent forward violently, and Bugs Linderman screamed like a woman. I saw Lieutenant Hassan's eyes then. They were hot and bright and happy, and I saw what he was doing to Linderman's left arm—bending it backward the wrong way at the elbow—and I realized that Lieutenant Hassan intended to break it.

A voice close behind me said, "That's enough! Break it up!"

I looked around. Major Finnegan was there. When I looked back, Bugs and

Lieutenant Hassan had gotten up and were standing at attention. They had done it very fast. If you knew Major Finnegan better you'd understand.

"All right," Finnegan said. "What's going on here?"

"Wrestling, sir," Lieutenant Hassan said, stiff as a poker.

"The way it sounded when I was sitting in my office," Finnegan said, "somebody was getting murdered."

Lieutenant Hassan held the rigid brace, looking like a West Point cadet. "No murdered, sir," he said, and if I hadn't been so leery of Major Finnegan I'd have busted out laughing. "Jost frondly wrestling, sir."

Maybe you've read these stories where the Commanding Officer of the base is a real spit-and-polish bully in the beginning—and you know right away that in the end he's going to turn into a real swell guy with a heart as big as a house. Maybe that stuff happens in stories—but it doesn't happen very often in real life. I've had some spit-and-polish CO's in my time, and very few of them turned out to be real swell guys. They turned out to be spit-and-polish CO's. While Major Finnegan didn't go in much for wheeling and dealing, he was still a jerk in my book. He had this kind of permanent sneer on his face, and cold fishy eyes, and he didn't care who you were, or where it was—if he wanted to ream you—brother, you got reamed.

Major Finnegan worked hard, which is about all I can say for him. He didn't try to teach the Foreign Legion by pointing at a blackboard with a piece of chalk. He climbed into a Sabrejet and went out and showed them personally. Nobody ever complained that Major Finnegan was a lousy flier. His flying ability was in the record. He'd flown two tours in Korea and he'd shot down six Migs and two Yaks.

Major Finnegan knew Bugs Linderman from quite a few things Bugs had done from time to time. He said, "How about this, Linderman? Just friendly wrestling, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Looks like you have blood on your arms," Finnegan said to Linderman. "Better get over to the infirmary and have them looked at."

"Yes, sir," Bugs said. He saluted Major Finnegan and took off.

"All right, Hassan," Major Finnegan said. "Step into my office a minute. I want to talk to you."

Lieutenant Hassan put on his jacket and cap and marched into Major Finnegan's office as if he were going to meet a firing squad. The door shut. Ten minutes later he came out, still marching like a ramrod, went out of the hangar and up the road, and didn't speak to me. I didn't blame him. I knew what Major Finnegan was like.

From then on, Major Finnegan kept after Lieutenant Hassan. I don't mean he needled him or jumped him without a reason. He just didn't let him get away with anything—not even little tilings. Thirty per cent hits is good rocketry, and Lieutenant Hassan scored twenty-eight per cent, but Finnegan made him fly two extra missions.

During the air-combat phase of the course, Finnegan took Lieutenant Hassan on personally six times—and whipped him all over the sky, for the first five. On the sixth, Lieutenant Hassan lucked himself into the saddle position somehow, and the whole squadron was secretly tickled pink. The major looked sour as a lemon that day. Lieutenant Hassan had touched him on a sore spot when he tangled with Bugs. Major Finnegan didn't go along with the new Air Force idea that officers and enlisted men ought to more or less run a democratic operation in the field. Or in the barracks either. Somebody had to be boss, Finnegan said. How could you boss a guy if he called you by your first name, borrowed your dough, and felt free to horse around with you like a beer-hall pal?

Today, out on the target range, the whole thing seemed pretty unimportant. Tomorrow afternoon I'd be where Major Finnegan couldn't put a finger on me. I'd never see the major or Lieutenant Hassan or any of the rest of them again. I'd not even see a Sabrejet unless one flew over Allentown. In a way, it made me feel kind of sad—until I thought about trying to sleep in that hot barracks with guys coming in yelling and singing at all hours of the night. When I thought about that, and how the PX no longer gave a serviceman a break on prices, and how inflation had kept way out in front of pay raises, even with free meals and bed, I felt sorry for old Joe Fuller, who is a career man and who's been in so long he can't afford to get out. Sergeant Fuller had been after me to sign on for another hitch.

"You're a good mech, Novak," Fuller had said. "You sign over and I'll see you make staff sergeant in a year— and tech in two. If I don't, you can pick my stripes right off my arm."

"I like you, sarge," I said. "I kind of like the Air Force, only I hate to admit it. But I can't get married on what I'd make, even as tech."

I showed him the picture of Stephanie I had in my wallet, and he quit arguing. Stephy did look like Gina Lollobrigida.

We were all up in the tower now, waiting for the flight to show up. Captain Lars Borge, from Norway, was taking his turn at the tower mike. I was a little tense. I didn't like to watch these skip-bombing sessions. I didn't like to see anyone get hurt, and I didn't want to get hurt myself. The Sabres came in right on the deck at 500 miles an hour, and they passed within spitting distance of the tower. If anything screwed up at the wrong time—boom, no tower, no plane, no people.

A voice came over the loud-speaker. It was quite clear and matter-of-fact. "Hello, Porkchop tower. This is Major Finnegan leading Flamingo Red Squadron. Is the range open for bombing?"

"Roger," Captain Borge radioed back. "The range is open, major."

"Roger and out," Finnegan's voice said over the speakers. "Be down there in about one minute."

I looked out to the west and caught a glint of sun on metal. Then I picked up Finnegan's fighter, moving very fast across on his base leg. The Sabrejet looked like a tiny silver arrowhead against the brick-red wall of the mountains. The bright arrowhead curved toward us.

"Flamingo Red Leader in," Finnegan said. "Right and white."

That meant he was entering final approach, was using the right-hand range, and had seen the safety panel and identified it as white—therefore safe. The arrowhead out there turned to a tiny dot as Finnegan lined up, then dropped abruptly to the desert floor. For several moments I lost it in the heat haze. Then I saw it, very close and low, moving like a shell. A tiny blue speck left the Sabre's belly, held with the plane an instant, then sliced cleanly through the bomb nets. The waterfiU ricocheted like a squirming blue-tipped skyrocket, trailing a plume of yellow dust. The jet scream hit us like a whip—silky smootli, but hot and stabbing as fire, and Finnegan was going up hke a silver rocket, turning again into a tiny arrowhead as he made his wingover turn to hold the bombing pattern.

"Flamingo Red Leader out," Fiimegan's voice said, calm and easy.

Instantly another voice, a voice with a thick accent, said, "Flamingo Red One in—right and white."

I glanced at the mountain. The first student was flashing across the red wall on his base leg. I tapped Lieutenant Hassan's arm. "We better get down and man the jeep, sir. There'll be some scoring to do in a couple of minutes."

Lieutenant Hassan was looking at the incoming fighter. His eyes were very bright. He came back from where he was, and said, "Sure, Frank. We go."

The jeep was parked in the shade of the big Air Force CO₂ wagon. Now that the sun was up, the air quivered, and the shadows on the ground were sharp as knives. The fighters came over, one by one. Some of them dropped too soon and their bombs hit the sand and porpoised over the nets. One pilot doped off and almost let his jet sink into the ground, and my heart came right up in my throat. Only two students got hits.

I went over to the portable radar shack where they kept the soda pop in a GI can full of melting ice. I pulled two out—one for me, one for Lieutenant Hassan. The ice water was numbing cold on my wrist and there was a little crisp shell of frozen juice inside the bottles. The fighters finished their skip-bombing and I could see them off on the rim of the mountain, close-packed glinting specks, getting ready for their rocket firing. Now that I had been there awhile and gotten used to the silky-hot screech of the engines, I was loosening up. I wasn't nervous any more. I was just hot and uncomfortable.

I had a cigarette in my mouth and was grubbing around for a pack of matches when I heard the sound of the compressor screwing up—very far away, and very faint—but it felt as if somebody had reached inside and squeezed my heart. As I said, an 86-D is a wonderful airplane, when it's tuned on the money. But louse up the electronic engine controls, even a little bit, and you may get compressor surge. Compressor surge is something the pilot

can't do much about except take off power and pray. There are 1000 little buckets in that compressor wheel. They are turning around 14,000 times a minute. Lose one of them—just one—and it's like setting off a bomb inside the fuselage. You are strictly a batch of bolts flying in formation in about two tenths of a second.

I stuck my head out the side of the jeep and looked for the jets. They weren't on the mountain rim. I swept the sky to the west. I found them, still in formation, headed south toward Nellis. They were like six little diamonds in the sun glare, all tight and neat and compact—and then, while I watched, one of them left formation, and started down, trailing a thin brown stream of smoke.

He's too low, I thought. He'll never glide to Nellis from there.

The compressor surge came to me clearly now—a faint, toylike *burrrip* . . . *bip* . . . *burrrip-bip-bip*, and I could see the smoke trail thicken and thin, thicken and thin. A little tongue of flame torched out of the tailpipe, vanished, torched again. The Sabre's wings flashed in the sun as he banked and headed back toward our position.

"Is flame-out," Lieutenant Hassan's voice said softly beside me. "Is Major Finnigan, I think."

The forced landing was awful to watch, but it was kind of wonderful, too, because the pilot of that plane was now riding strictly for the money. What he did now could mean getting out of the airplane and walking away—or it could mean being carried, and maybe never walking anywhere ever again. The plane sank lower in a gradual bank and I read the number. It was Major Finnegan. He had not extended his wheels, but his wing flaps were down and his speed brakes were out. He passed slightly in front of us and hit the desert in a violent explosion of yellow dust. Just before he hit I saw a flicker of plastic as he blew his cockpit canopy clear of the crippled plane.

I kicked the jeep's starter, wheeled around the CO₂ track, and stamped the foot feed on the floor. The ground around the targets was very rough from the bomb and rocket strikes and it was smoother in the open desert. I skirted as many sage clumps as I could, and those I couldn't I ran over. Back behind me, on the tower I heard the deep moaning of a siren.

The dust had settled when I skidded to a stop at the scene of the crash. The Sabrejet had hit a gully and flipped over on its back. A wisp of black smoke was curling up from the right wing. There was a soft funny *pooooo/n*, and the wing was bathed in bright flame.

I looked around for the fire truck. It had been right beside us at the tower. It should be right beside us now, pumping CO_a. It wasn't. I could see it—a bulky bright-red toy, standing where it had been parked—and men swarming over it like frantic bugs.

"Trock," Lieutenant Hassan said. "Fire trock not come?"

"It must be stalled," I said. "The driver must have got excited and flooded the carburetor."

I felt the jeep tilt slightly and looked across, and Lieutenant Hassan was gone. He was out of the jeep and running toward the burning plane. He ran with hunched driving power, like a plunging halfback, and when he got close to the gully he dived forward and his body hit and skidded out of sight under the plane. I couldn't see him any more. He didn't come out. About three seconds passed. I looked around to see if the fire truck was coming. It was still standing there, and I could feel the heat of the burning plane, now, on my bare arms.

O. K., Novak, I thought, and I was scareder than I had ever been.

When I got down in the gully under the plane Lieutenant Hassan was trying to loosen a steel bar that was embedded in the dirt. He was huddled up like a little squirrel, lying on his back in the ditch, and his face was corded purple and his eyes bulged as he pulled on the bar. Under the bar, embedded in the wet red sand, was a hand. The hand belonged to Major Finnegan. It was pale as wax and the back of it looked like hamburger that has been smeared with dirt.

I don't know how I got under there with Lieutenant Hassan, but I got under there with him and got one hand on the bar, and then two hands, by clawing a grip hole in the dirt. We pulled together with everything we had, and I could feel the heat now, as if the fire was glowing right in my face, and smell the smoke and hot metal, and the bar didn't budge.

Lieutenant Hassan made a whimpering, growling sound, like a frantic animal, and threw his whole body into a violent lunge against the bar. It budged just a little. Then, when we hit it together it came free so suddenly and so hard it hit me in the face, and Major Finnegan was lying down there on top of us in the ditch.

"Fronk," Lieutenant Hassan said. "The feet—you!"

You can do things faster than human sometimes. Lieutenant Hassan and I brought Major Finnegan out of the ditch together, running with him, staggering and stumbling, but not falling, and the heat was like acid on our flesh, and then we were out in the sagebrush, safe from the fire, and the Sabrejet was a solid roaring tower of flame.

It was dark outside the base hospital and I was lying in bed looking at the lights of Las Vegas sparkling out across the black desert and feeling warm and woozy from the sulpha and the morphine shots when the door opened and Sergeant Joe Fuller came in.

"You can't stay long, sergeant," the nurse said to Fuller.

"All right, ma'am," Fuller said. "I won't."

He nodded to Lieutenant Hassan, who was in the bed next to me with his hands and head bandaged and his face painted with antiseptic. Then he looked at me. "Hello, Novak. You all right?"

"My face is banged up," I said, "and I somehow managed to sprain my ankle—but I'm gonna make it." I paused. "How is Major Finnegan?"

Joe Fuller looked down at his hands. "I don't really know," he said. "Somebody said he was busted up pretty bad, but it could be a rumor. I don't know." He sat down on the chair by my bed. "Anything I can get for you, Novak?"

"No, thanks, sarge."

"The guys sent their regards," Fuller said. "They said if you wasn't gonna ship out they'd have time to throw you a beer bust." He looked over at Lieutenant Hassan. "The guys sent their regards to you, too, sir."

Hassan smiled through the bandages.

"Novak," Fuller said.

"Yes?"

"About that staff-sergeant rating—I think I can get it for you right away if you want it."

I looked at him. He was a big rawboned guy who had a heavy blue beard and looked as if he needed a shave right after he shaved. He had black eyes and his voice was thin and high-pitched. I said, "Thanks, sarge—but I can't. I'd like to work for you as a staff sergeant—but it wouldn't be enough. I couldn't afford to take it. I'm sorry."

Fuller looked at me. Then he looked down at his hands again. "O.K., Novak," he said. "I don't blame you." He got up. "You sure there's nothing I can get for you or the Lieutenant?"

Hassan shook his head.

"Nothing," I said.

"Well," Sergeant Fuller said, "I guess I'll be getting along. If there's anything you want, tell the nurse. She'll pass the word."

"Sure, sarge," I said. "Thanks a lot."

"That's O.K.," Fuller said.

He walked out into the hall. I heard him go past the desk and say good night to the floor nurse. Then it got quiet again.

"Fronk," Lieutenant Hassan said in the silence. "You leave Air Force?"

I turned on my side and looked at him. He looked more like an Indian than a Turk with all that red stuff on his face.

"I'm leaving the Air Force," I said. "I can't afford to stay in."

Lieutenant Hassan's face looked puzzled. "What means this—cant-afford?"

"Money," I said. "They don't pay enough money. I want to get married."

Lieutenant Hassan looked at me without saying anything for three or four seconds. Then he turned over and lay on his back on the pillow, looking up at the ceiling.

"I wish I could stay in," I said. "In a way, I'd kind of like to stay in."

Lieutenant Hassan kept looking at the ceiling. He did not speak.

"Look," I said, suddenly angry. "The United States isn't like Turkey. We don't live in mud houses and eat hard bread. We have a standard of living! But you wouldn't know about that!"

Lieutenant Hassan kept on looking up at the ceiling. *O.K.*, I thought. // you

want to play it quiet, I can play it quiet too. But I was wrong. Lieutenant Hassan must have been lying there thinking what he was going to say.

He said, "I was soldier in Turkey—before Air Force. I was in town call Sarikamis, near Russian border. I have one uniform, one pair shoe, one coat—two years. We all eat out of big kettle, wash in brook. Every month I get seventy kurus. You know how much kurus America money? One kurus—one penny." He stopped and I thought he had finished. Then he went on. "Korea war come. In Sarikamis they ask for volunteer to fight Moscof. Everybody volunteer. Is not possible all to go. So draw lots. Some win. Some lose. But everybody still want to go, a few fights start. So officers finally put all soldiers who are going to Korea inside barb-wire fence."

I heard the bed rustle and saw Lieutenant Hassan out of the corner of my eye, facing me. "Late night," Lieutenant Hassan said. "Other soldiers—not going to Korea—throw coats over barb wire. In morning, all soldiers inside. This true, Fronk. I know. I there myself."

He stopped talking. It was very quiet in the room. Down on the flight line I heard a jet wind up tight and hold a minute, then slack off in a sizzling rumble. *It's corn*, I thought. *Everything the guy says is probably true, but it's corn. When I get back in Allentown with my girl I won't remember any of it.*

But I knew I was wrong. I'd remember it. I'd remember every lousy word of it, as long as I lived.

"Shut up," I said. "Will you please shut up, lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Hassan did not speak.

"I'll go back and talk to my girl," I said. "I can't make any important move until I talk to her."

I hadn't been looking at Lieutenant Hassan directly. I somehow hadn't been able to. Now I looked him in the eye. He was grinning at me. I tried to look tough, but I couldn't make it. I couldn't even manage to look neutral. I'd suddenly realized something. Guys like Lieutenant Hassan and Major Finnegan were in a special league. It was a pretty tough league to get into—and membership in it didn't have anything at all to do with how many stripes a guy wore or how much dough he made. I knew something now. I wanted in that league myself. Then I couldn't hold it back any longer. I began to grin at Lieutenant Hassan. I just felt good, was all. I felt darned good,

Stand By to Bail Out!

The squadron was already assembled when Col. Frank Hunter stepped into the briefing room at Bryce-Morton RAF Station in England. A young captain

was waiting to begin the weather briefing in front of a luminous purple map of the Atlantic Ocean. A thin gold line connected Bryce-Morton with McKean Air Force Base, in Florida. Another thin gold line came up from the Azores to mark the tanker-plane rendezvous.

"You shouldn't have any weather trouble," the captain said, as soon as Colonel Hunter was seated. "Everything looks perfect except for one dinky little front about twelve hundred miles offshore."

"What about that front that was reported over Texas?" somebody asked.

"The Texas front has moved into Louisiana," the captain said. "But it's been stationary for the last four hours. However, if it starts moving again and clobbers Florida, you'll be able to go back to Bermuda. You'll have plenty of fuel. There's no sweat there." He paused. "Are there any more questions?"

When nobody spoke, the captain left the platform and a master sergeant briefed them quickly in communications. Nobody paid much attention. The briefing was only a formality. The crews knew the mission in detail. Three months ago they had flown their B-47 Stratojet bombers from the United States to England for temporary training duty; now they were going home. It was a milk run.

Colonel Hunter rose. "If anybody fails to take on fuel

from the tankers, I want him to divert immediately to the Azores. Is that clear?"

There were nods. Hunter knew it was clear, but he wanted to underscore it. He didn't want anyone trying to stretch fuel and going into the water.

"All right. Man your planes."

It was dark and raining when Hunter left the briefing room with Maj. Nick Mazzerelli, his bombardier, and Capt. John Bishop, his copilot. Bishop was a tough youngster with a red face, crew haircut and hot, impatient eyes. Nick Mazzerelli looked like a fat organ grinder. Nick claimed that his wife, Rose, made the best pizza pies in the air force, and Nick's waistline showed it. He was her steadiest and most satisfied customer.

Colonel Hunter wasn't thinking about his crew or about the upcoming flight as he walked toward his plane in the rainy darkness. He was thinking about the letter he'd received from Janie three days ago.

"Rod Kinemuth was killed yesterday afternoon," Janie wrote. "It happened on the field while Veda and I were there waiting in Rod's car. He was coming in for a landing. The plane burned. Nobody got out. It was horrible."

Then Janie wrote that she was leaving him. She was taking the kids back to her parents' ranch in Idaho. First, Hunter was bitterly angry, then sick. He was crazy about Janie and the kids. He loved them more than anything in the world, but Rod's death must have hit her hard. She'd been begging him to resign his commission for two years, ever since he'd passed the twenty-year mark and been eligible for retirement on half pay. When her father died suddenly last summer and left her mother with the big cattle ranch in Idaho,

Janie had done everything but lay down an ultimatum. This was the chance. The ranch was a real he-man's job. He'd love it if he tried.

Hunter knew he wouldn't love the ranch if he tried. He'd go slowly nuts on the ranch. But Rod Kinemuth's death was something else. Rod and Veda had been the Hunters' best friends. They'd baby-sat with each others' kids, and the four of them must have played about a million hands of bridge at one time and another. Watching Rod's plane burn must have been rough. It must have been very rough.

Hunter's crew chief, Sgt. Ed Simpcic, saluted when they arrived at the plane. He was a little lantern-jawed man with bad teeth who never got excited and knew as much about the B-47 as the Boeing engineering staff.

"Everything set, sergeant?" Hunter asked.

"Not quite, sir. A C-Ninety-seven cargo plane aborted. The colonel in charge of transportation said to unload it and put the stuff in the bomb bays of your flight, sir."

"Couldn't the colonel hold the cargo until the Ninety-seven was flyable?"

"I guess not, sir," Simpcic said. "The colonel said it was mostly assist-take-off rockets and spare jet engines. He said we might be needing them as soon as we got back to McKean Field."

The colonel is off his rocker, Hunter thought.

"Major Wilcox's plane is ready," Simpcic said. "He was parked right beside the Ninety-seven and we loaded him first."

"All right," Hunter said. "Thank you, sergeant."

He walked quickly to Major Wilcox's plane. It had stopped raining, but the hardstand was sheeted with water. The sky was very black and the banks of searchlights reflected blindingly from the puddles. Major Wilcox and his crew were standing under the plane, going over some papers with a flashlight. They saluted.

"I understand you're loaded," Hunter said. "That right?"

"Yes, sir," Major Wilcox said.

"There's been a foul-up," Hunter said. "I'm staying behind until the squadron is air-borne. I want you to lead the flight, major. Can you be wheels-up at oh six hundred?"

"Yes, sir!"

Hunter walked back along the flight line. The jet engines were being loaded into the bomb bays. The assist-take-off rockets were being placed in their accustomed positions in the blast tubes in the flanks of the fuselage. After a while Wilcox's plane fired up. As it taxied past, Hunter smelled the kerosene fumes and felt the warm turbulence of the tail pipes. The insides of the pods glowed in the dark.

The planes took off at fifteen-minute intervals until four were gone. Hunter's plane was loaded now, and ready. He and Captain Bishop made the long pre-take-off check. The sky was dirty gray when they finally rolled out to the run-up slot. Hunter checked each engine at full power. All checked normal

except No. 1, which fluctuated slightly at high rpm.

Bishop's voice came over the intercom, "Colonel Hunter, we've got a jitter in Number One, sir."

"I'm watching it, Bishop."

Hunter knew from the tone of Bishop's voice that Bishop expected him to abort and get the No. 1 engine looked at. Bishop had been flying B-29's in Korea against MIG's and flak. Hunter hadn't been in combat since he bombed Germany with the Eighth Air Force, and this didn't mean much to Bishop. Bishop had never said anything out of line, but Hunter knew he considered him a nervous old man—rank-happy to boot.

Normally he would have aborted until the engine was checked, but this flight was different. He had made up his mind. He was going to resign. This transatlantic flight would, in all probability, be his last mission. He knew General Forbes. The moment he put his request for resignation on Forbes' desk, he was through in the front seat of a B-47. A B-47 was one of the finest bombers in mass production in the world. It carried atom bombs. You didn't coax pilots to fly a 47. Pilots schemed to fly it, fought to fly it. B-47 duty was career duty—the cream of the cream.

Hunter called the control tower for permission to take off, got it and rolled out onto the runway. He cut in water injection, brought the bomber smoothly to full power and released his brakes. The plane moved slowly. He was very heavy with four jet engines in the bomb bays and a full complement of eighteen assist-take-off rockets in the tubes. He had prefigured his break-ground speed at 150 miles an hour, but he waited until he had 165 to pull it off. The big jet screamed low over the end of the runway. He glanced at the No. 1 tach. No. 1 was putting out full power. "Wheels up!" he said. "Wheels up!" Bishop rogered.

Hunter heard the servos whine and felt the four big tandem wheels rise slowly and thump into the belly and the stream lined door grind shut. The speed jumped: 190 .. . 200 . . . 220 . . . 250. Mist seethed across the windscreen and the farms were blotted out. Hunter climbed rapidly on instruments, the mist lightened, and they broke out on top at 8500 into a clean cloudless dawn. The east was red. The sky overhead was lettuce green sprinkled with faint stars. "Nice fishing weather," Mazzerelli's voice said from the nose. "What about some trout fishing Saturday, skipper?" "I'll think about it," Hunter said. "We could go over to that railroad bridge behind Daytona Beach where we took Janie and Rose that time." Hunter was silent.

"I could get Rose to make us some pizzas," Nick said. "I also got a couple of bottles of muscatel I've been saving. We could make it a picnic."

"I'll think about it," Hunter said.

He wouldn't be going fishing with Nick Saturday—not with Janie and the kids in Idaho and a resignation form on General Forbes' desk—but there was no use going into it now. Nick would find out soon enough.

But he wanted to go. Very badly. He knew how the bridge would look: very

quiet and hot, with the sky bright blue and the palms tawny in the sun and the telephone lines beside the bridge festooned with old bobbers and plugs and ragged ends of line. The trout hit on the changing tide. You sat out there with a bottle of muscatel and your live-shrimp bucket on a rope trailing in the water, but you had to look sharp for the Atlantic Coast Line trains. They came up very fast and quiet, and were practically on top of you before the engineer let loose with his air horn. Once Hunter had been caught on the bridge and had to lie down on an outrigger while the wheels roared past three feet from his head and bits of dirt shook loose from the brown beams and pattered into the black water. But that was over now. After he talked to General Forbes he wouldn't feel much like fishing with Nick—and maybe Nick wouldn't feel much like fishing with him.

Now Nick stopped talking and became very busy with his navigation. They left the undercast far below, a cottony blanket of cloud from horizon to horizon, as brilliant as a snowfield in the sun. At 40,000 Hunter leveled off and set up for cruise. It was colder now and he added cabin heat. His feet were cold, but the sun was very hot on his face. He pulled down the green sun visor which was hinged to his crash helmet, and the sky turned a deep dark green.

"Bishop, will you take over for a while?"

"Yes, sir."

He took his hands and feet off the controls after he felt Bishop come on. He settled back and shut his eyes. In his mind he saw Janie the way she'd looked when he kissed her good-by, trim and pretty still at forty-one, with a light Florida tan and dark brown hair. Janie had been getting gray, but she had started using one of those new miracle hair tints they advertise. At first, Hunter hadn't liked the idea, but now he was glad. It made Janie look much younger. It made up for the lines around her eyes and the pinched look she got when she was tired. Hunter knew how those lines had got there. He had put them there, when he'd flown against the Nazis over Germany in B-17's; the time he'd had to bail out over New Brunswick and hadn't been picked up for four days; other times—many other times. Every time the phone rang, every time there was a knock on the door when he was up flying, Janie had one thought in her mind. He didn't blame her for going home. Twenty-two years of listening to phones and doorbells was a very long time. Janie rated some peace of mind. He'd had his flying, now it was Janie's turn.

Below, the undercast was breaking up. Cottony clouds dropped purple shadows on the distant surface of the sea. Hunter unhooked his oxygen mask and ate an orange from his flight lunch. He had been checking the rpm's of No. 1 engine periodically since take-off'. They had been in the air now a little over four hours. The engine was smooth and steady. He was glad he had not aborted. He leaned to his left and looked down. The ocean was cold and dark blue, and the sun glared up, its blinding reflection keeping pace with the plane. It was lonely out here. But it was beautiful. He would miss this, and things Uke this, more than anyone knew.

"Colonel Hunter," Bishop's voice said, "I've just contacted the tanker. He's a hundred and twenty-eight miles out at twenty thousand."

"O.K., Bishop. I'll take over and fly the refuel."

He took the controls and began to let down to the refueling altitude. He reduced power and was retrimming the plane when Bishop said, "Colonel Hunter, there's smoke from Number Four."

He glanced back. No. 4 engine was in the double pod beside the fuselage on his right. It was putting out a thin trail of brown smoke. He checked the gauges. Everything was normal. He reduced power a little and the smoke thickened slightly. When he restored power, it thinned, but it was still there. Incomplete combustion. Could come from a dozen harmless causes, but he didn't like it. Nobody liked anything, no matter how slight, when he was almost halfway between England and America, thirty-five thousand feet in the air.

He switched on the liaison radio and called the tanker. He got a time hack from the pilot and they synchronized their watches. He estimated hookup time at 1107 Zebra. At 1105 he spotted the tanker ahead and slightly below, a tiny bright silhouette against the dark sea. He glanced at No. 4. It was still putting out a thin stream of smoke.

He eased the B-47 gently in below and behind the tanker and overhauled it by delicate adjustments on the throttles. The boom operator was lying up in the refueling window, masked and goggled, and the flying boom groped in the air like a long, finned worm.

"Forward six feet," the boom operator said. . . . "Stop. . . . Two more feet. . . . Hold it!"

The tip of the boom ticked the open fuel hatch, slipped off. He applied very careful stick and rudder, centering the plane on the boom. A slight turbulence pulled him away and down. Then the boom went into the receptacle with a faint jar and locked. A green light blossomed on the panel.

"O.K.," Hunter said. "Fill her up."

A chuckle came from the tanker. "High test or regular, sir?"

Hunter grinned up at the boom operator. "Just toss in any old thing you have around."

He flew very carefully now, matching his control movements to the flight path of the tanker. Both of them were descending in a steady flat angle. As the bomber took on JP-4 and grew heavier, it had to keep moving faster or it would stall. The descent kept the speed up.

Presently the boom operator said, "You're full, sir. You can disconnect when ready."

Hunter said, "Thanks for the drink."

He reduced throttle slightly and the boom slipped free and excess fuel in the line sloshed over his windscreen. Then the slipway door was shut over the fuel hatch and the screen was clear. He felt better. He could go places now: the Azores, Bermuda, Florida, New York maybe. If No. 4 got too ornery, he'd

just cut it off and fly on the remaining five engines. They were making good time. The weak front had never materialized and the headwinds had been light.

"Take it awhile, will you, Bishop? I'm going out to lunch."

"Roger. I've got it, colonel."

The Air Force really put out a lunch for seventy cents: two pieces of fried chicken, a hard-boiled egg, a peanut-butt[^]r-and-jelly sandwich, salad and a candy bar for dessert. He ate the chicken and was peeling the egg when he felt a sudden strong vibration through the seat. He dropped the egg on his lap and stared at the panel. All the needles were steady; the vibration was gone.

"What was that, Bishop?"

"I don't know, sir. It came and went so fast I couldn't get a reading."

"We're not in the Coffin Corner, are we?"

"Oh, no, sir. We're not high enough."

He checked No. 4 again. The tach was fluctuating very slightly—might be in the strument. The smoke was still there. He didn't feel hungry any more. He put the rest of his flight lunch back in the box and stowed it on the floor.

"Nick, what's our position?"

"Just a minute, skipper. I'm checking it now."

In a short time, Nick said, "We're coming up on Bermuda. We'll pass it about two hundred miles to the south in another hour."

Then Hunter called Bishop on the intercom.

"What's the weather Stateside?"

"I haven't been able to get a clear sequence. Either it's static or the radio's fritzing up."

"See if you can contact the plane ahead of us," Hunter said.

"I've tried, sir," Bishop said. "I can't raise a thing."

Hunter's mouth was dry and his lips felt sticky. He scrubbed his lips with his teeth. He could declare an emergency now if he wanted to, and go into Bermuda. But on what basis? A little smoke, a short jolt of vibration?

He sat back in the seat, but now he did not relax. He kept up a steady sweep-check of the instruments, and his ears were tuned to the hollow, remote thunder of the jets. Every so often he checked the smoke from No. 4. It seemed to him that it had thickened a little, but he wasn't sure.

"Bishop, how about pulling in some weather?"

"I've been trying, sir. I can't seem to get anything but a bunch of static."

"Keep it up. When you get a clear sequence, give it to me."

"Ah—Roger, sir."

Two and a half hours passed. They were seven hundred miles past Bermuda and closing in on the Florida coast when Bishop finally got some weather on the radio. The front had moved in. McKean Field was quoting a three-hundred-foot ceiling and ground visibility of half a mile, and the forecast was for lower. Everything to the west was socked solid.

"How about Georgia?" Hunter asked.

"Turner Field is right on the ground," Bishop said. "Hunter Field is giving a hundred and a quarter."

"How about Navy Master, in Miami?"

"It's four hundred and a half," Bishop said. "It looks as if we've bought the farm, sir."

"We can make it all right with a GCA," Hunter said, "unless it gets worse. Have we got the fuel to go back to Bermuda if we have to?"

"Yes, sir," Bishop said. "No sweat at all on the fuel, sir."

Hunter looked out ahead. Low on the horizon he saw the clouds of the front massed, uneven and dirty, like a pile of dust dumped out of a vacuum-sweeper bag. The clouds rose steadily as they approached. He judged the tops to be around seventeen thousand, and started making his letdown. The air began to get turbulent and the plane wallowed slightly, and he could see the wing tips flexing off the gusts.

"I've got land on the radar scope," Nick Mazzerelli said. "Matanzas Inlet is dead."

There was a rapid vibration, followed by a heavy jolting. Hunter heard a muffled explosion and felt something strike the fuselage. He whirled in his seat. The No. 4 engine had torn itself through the side of the streamlined pod and was out in the airstream, blazing fiercely. As he watched, he saw it vibrate savagely, shake itself loose and fall free. Then No. 5, adjacent in the pod, blew up. Pieces slashed into the fuselage; he felt the plane shake all over, and then No. 5 was gone. He was staring at a flaming, gutted pod on the end of a twisted strut.

He felt Johnny Bishop cut power on No. 6, on the end of the wing, but it was too late. The fire must have traveled through the lines. No. 6 was burning with an intense weird blue flame. Hunter felt the right wing sagging because of the unequal thrust of the three good engines on the other side. He twisted the wheel hard left. The wing was very sluggish. It stayed down; then came up slowly and wearily. He quickly reduced power and shut off fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid and electricity to the damaged wing.

"Pilot to crew," he said, and his voice seemed to be coming back to him out of a long tunnel. "Is anyone hurt?"

"Copilot O.K." Bishop said laconically.

"I'm all right," Nick said excitedly. "What the heck happened, sir?"

"We over land yet, Nick?"

"About three minutes."

"Come back on the catwalk and stand by to bail out. I've got a bad leak in the forward fuel tank. She may go up any minute."

"On my way," Nick said. "Got my extension on. I'll stay in contact, skipper."

"Stand by to bail out, Bishop," Hunter said.

"Ah—Roger, sir."

Hunter called the control tower at McKean. He told them where he was and

what had happened. He glanced out at the wing while he talked. The inboard fire had gone out. The pod on the end was flickering from fuel starvation. It went out as he watched, and something loosened in his throat. At least they weren't going to burn.

Hello, McKean tower. What's your weather down there now?"

"Two hundred feet and a half mile, but it's variable. There's scud coming across the field. It goes down to zero at times."

"Is the field clear?"

"There's no traffic. There are planes parked on the south apron and in front of the hangars."

"Is the north end clear?"

"Affirmative. The north end is clear. The wind is northwest at twenty-five. Use Runway Three-fifty."

Hunter left the tower and went on intercom. "I'm going to make a Ground Controlled Approach," he told Bishop and Mazzerelli. "It's stinking down there. I suggest you guys bail out. I'm not ordering you to, but this landing may turn rough as it goes along." He was surprised that his voice was steady. He felt like screaming. He had never been so scared.

There was a short pause. Then Mazzerelli said, "I'm getting a little old for parachutes, Frank. If it's not an order, I think I'll just ride down."

"I'll ride, too, sir," Bishop's voice said.

He went into the cloud tops at 16,000. GCA had him on their radarscope. There was less turbulence in the clouds than he had expected, but he had to fly with the wheel over to the left, holding his heading with right rudder. The gyros were all off. Twice he thought he'd lost it. Each time the wing finally staggered back up. When Ground Control finally got him in the approach pattern, he was sweat-soaked and panting, and the muscles in his right leg were beginning to cramp.

"Turn to your final heading," the Ground Controller said. "Three-fifty your final heading."

He horsed the crippled jet around, trying to set up a stable three-fifty on the compass. He called to Bishop to put the gear down, and felt a slight jolt, but no green lights flashed. The wiring was burned out: he could only hope.

"Three-fifty your heading," GCA was saying matter-of-factly. "Twenty-one hundred your altitude. You are on glide path. You are twelve miles from touchdown."

The miniature plane on the gyro horizon tipped steeply to the right. He hauled left on the yoke and stuck in right rudder. Outside there was nothing but bright white mist. He must be over the lake now. Twelve miles ahead was a wide, beautiful concrete runway, buried in the white mist.

"You are off heading," GCA said. "Three-forty your new heading. Three-forty your new heading. Eleven miles to touchdown. Fifteen hundred your altitude."

Ten degrees off heading in one mile ... the gyro was tipping ... his right leg

was cramping. . . .

"You are below glide path," said GCA. "One hundred feet below glide path."

His right palm flicked out and socked the nest of throttles. They were already full on. He was carrying all the power he had. The plane was sinking. He couldn't bring it up.

"Two hundred feet below glide path," GCA said. "You're getting low. Low. Bring it up."

/ can't, his mind shouted. / can't, you insane fool.

"New heading," GCA told him inexorably. "Three-thirty your new heading. Three-thirty your heading. You are very low. Three hundred feet below glide path."

Hunter spoke into the intercom, "Bishop, stand by to fire ATO rockets."

"Roger," Bishop's voice said tightly.

"Three-fifty your heading now," GCA said. Then suddenly the man shouted. "Bring it up! Bring it up! You're going in the water!"

Bishop's voice cut in, crisp and controlled. "I have contact."

His eyes leaped from the instruments to the windshield. Mist seethed past, and behind it, very close and rushing upward were patches of black water.

"Fire ATO," Hunter said into the intercom.

The sustained roar of the rockets pulled his head back and the sagging airspeed stabilized and began smoothly to increase. Then he saw the runway lights—two strings of dim orange beads—angling swiftly from the side. He had waited too long to fire the rockets. He was too close, too fast—twenty knots too fast, and the B-47 didn't forgive overspeed landings. It was sleek and heavy. It rolled forever—three hundred extra feet for every knot of excess speed. Twenty knots—six thousand feet!

He popped the drag chute and Bishop gave him full flaps at the same instant without his asking. The plane shuddered in mid-air and the runway was streaking past below. He thought it would float forever. He touched down well past midfield and stabbed the brakes with all his strength, listening to the expanders scream and the rubber squeal against the concrete. Then he deliberately steered off the runway to the left. He had half-a-mile visibility under the scud. He could see the abandoned sentry box used in World War II by the Army. He steered for it. Behind the shack was an old abandoned runway. The bomber plowed through the soft, wet earth, but it was still doing better than a hundred miles an hour when it hit the sentry shack. It flattened it with scarcely any shock, cow-boyed over a stack of crates and crashed directly into a parked truck. The truck blew out the front tires and slowed the plane to eighty, and then it was slamming and bucking along over the rough, abandoned runway, rims screeching into the concrete. He was down to seventy when the lake loomed ahead. Then he played his last ace. He retracted the wheels. There was a savage, grinding sound as the plane settled onto its belly, and for an instant he thought it was going over on its back—and then,

quite suddenly, they were stopped. Three hundred feet ahead was the black margin of the lake.

Hunter wasn't too clear on how the three of them got out. They got the lid off somehow and ran out on the low wing and jumped. Two minutes after coming to rest, they were huddled together, scratched and panting, several hundred feet away. The thought of fire could make people move very, very rapidly.

"That," Captain Bishop said, panting, at Hunter's elbow, "was probably as nice a hunk of flying as I ever rode through." A smile pulled at his tough red face. "I've got to hand it to you, skipper—I'll ride behind you any time!"

Then the fire trucks came tearing madly through the scattered cases and moaned to a stop beside the plane, and in a moment an ambulance appeared, and two jeeps. They saw General Forbes jump out of one jeep and hurry over to them. The general was a dapper little man with a thin mustache and very stern eyes. They saluted him.

"Anyone hurt?" Forbes asked.

"No, sir."

General Forbes looked at the plane. "What happened?"

"Number Four blew up just off the coast, sir," Hunter said. "It flew out of the pod and damaged Number Five. Five flew out a couple of seconds later. Then something went haywire and touched off Number Six."

"You made a GCA with three dead engines in this muck?"

"Yes, sir."

Forbes rubbed his hand over his chin. Then he tipped his visored cap back on his head and grinned. "This," he said, "should probably rate as just about the neatest trick of the week." He walked over to the plane and then around it. The fire trucks were standing by, but it was now evident they wouldn't be needed. The general came back. "She'll fly again," he said. "May cost a few bucks, but she's not too bad off. Climb into the jeep and I'll take you all back to the gate."

"We've got our B-Four bags in the plane, general," Mazzerelli said.

"Never mind the bags," the general said. "I want to get Colonel Hunter back to the gate. His wife is waiting for him. She's been down here listening to that big beast howling around in the overcast. I imagine she'd like to know how the landing turned out."

Janie was standing behind the fence near the airman guard. She was wearing a trench coat and high-heeled pumps, and her hair was messed up and she had been crying. When she saw Hunter get out of the jeep, she ran past the guard and threw her arms around his shoulders.

Hunter grabbed her tight. "Take it easy, honey. Everything's all right."

She put up her mouth and he kissed her very hard. He could feel her kiss him back and taste her tears. She held him very tight for a moment, then pushed herself away. The general and the other officers were watching.

"I won't bother you now," she said. "I know you have to clear Customs."

"Eventually. Not this very minute."

She smiled wanly. "Then you can buy a very wobbly girl a cup of coffee—if my knees will take me over there."

He turned and saluted the general. "Excuse me, sir?"

Forbes grinned and saluted. Hunter took Janie's hand and they walked toward the nearby snack bar. When they had left the general behind, he said, "Honey, I thought you'd be in Idaho."

"I was. I flew in yesterday with the kids." She looked up at him. "Have you mentioned—about retiring?"

"Not yet," he said. "But I'm going to. I've thought it out. You're right. I'm going in to see General Forbes tomorrow."

Janie stopped. She faced him, still holding his hand. "No, you're not," she said. "I hate flying. I hate every second of it and I always will. But I'm married to a pilot, not a rancher." She grinned suddenly. "Please don't put me through another half hour like the last one, though—at least not right away. Let me have a day or two to build up my strength."

"Honey "

"Don't say it," she said. "Don't say anything to me right now. Just get me my cup of coffee. O.K.?"

"O.K.," he said. "I'll get you that cup of coffee, darling."

The Frightened Pilot

The jet fighter caught fire when Lt. Ed Wheeler was trying to start it at the Air Force Base in Portland, Maine. He was using the manual procedure because automatic was out. He had lit the torch and the jet whine was building up when his tail-pipe temperature suddenly went crazy. He snatched the throttle back and was reaching for the cut-off switch when something blew up behind him and the cockpit filled with smoke.

Wheeler flipped his seat belt, scrambled up on the rim of the cockpit and jumped. The fall sent him sprawling.

He heard Lt. Vince Martinez yell from the back seat, "Ed! Ed! The console's jammed! I'm stuck! Help!"

Then the heat hit the side of his face and he rolled away from the flame and came up running, his body tense for the blast that would pick him up and fling him through the air when the fighter exploded. The blast never came.

An Air Force fire truck was idling in the areaway between the hangar and the jet line. The driver put it in gear, rolled up to spitting distance and pumped

a blanket of carbon dioxide all over Wheeler's jet in about four seconds. The fire went out.

Wheeler hurried back to his plane, but Lt. Don Luke, his wingman, was there ahead of him. Luke had been sitting in his own jet when the fire started. Now he was standing in the carbon-dioxide foam on Wheeler's wing, trying to get Vince Martinez out of the back seat. Vince was a radar observer. His console had jammed across his lap. It was necessary to fold the console back out of the way before Vince could move. In a few seconds, Don Luke and the ground crew had the console free and Vince Martinez crawled out on the wing. He was very white. He slipped on the foam and almost fell when he tried to climb down to the hardstand.

Ed Wheeler walked over to him. "You all right, Vince?"

Vince looked at him dazedly. Then he turned away and began retching.

Don Luke dropped off the wing. He was a tall, rangy boy with a pale face and cold, red-rimmed eyes. He had shot down four MIGs in Korea and had taught air combat at Nellis Air Force Base, in Nevada, before coming to the squadron. The Air Force had coined a name for pilots like Luke. They called them Tigers. Ed Wheeler had always thought it was a corny idea, but he'd never said so.

Luke stopped in front of Wheeler and stared at him steadily. "Where did you go, dad?" Luke said. "Out for a short beer?"

Then he turned his back and helped Vince Martinez over to the hangar.

The fire in Wheeler's plane delayed the take-off of the twelve F-94C Starfires which were being ferried from the Lockheed factory to Thule Air Force Base, in Northern Greenland. The Starfire was an all-weather interceptor. It had an afterburner, radar tracking, and fired rockets from a ring nest around the nose. It was just another stock jet until you kicked in the afterburner—and then it turned into quite an airplane.

That night, when Ed Wheeler walked into the Officers' Club, he saw Don Luke at the bar. He walked over and stood beside him.

"Hi, Don. Buy you a beer?"

Luke turned and stared at him. "No, thanks," he said. "I'm not drinking beer."

There was a glass of beer, half full, in front of him on the bar. Wheeler looked at it. Then he looked at Luke.

"What's the matter, Don?"

"Nothing," Luke said. "I'm just not drinking beer."

Ed Wheeler stood at the bar a little longer. His knees and wrists felt light and there was a humming in his ears. Luke did not speak to him again. In a moment, Wheeler walked over and put a nickel in a slot machine. He did not particularly want to play the slot machine, but he wanted an excuse to leave Luke.

Maj. Art Kincaid and Lt. Ike Mooney, the other two pilots in Wheeler's section, were playing pool behind the slot machines. Mooney was a cocky kid

from Oklahoma with a toothbrush haircut, bright blue eyes and a quick grin. Kincaid was dark and quiet; he had a slight potbelly, thinning hair, and always seemed to have an unlighted cigar in his mouth. Both Mooney and Kincaid had flown F-86 Sabrejets in Korea.

Wheeler left the slot machines and walked back to the pool tables. He stood several minutes watching the game.

Then he said, "Hey, Mooney. How about joining up?"

Mooney glanced at Kincaid across the table. Kincaid was chalking his cue. He finished and laid the chalk down on the rail. He said, "We're just about ready to quit, Wheeler. It v"wouldn't be worth your while, really."

"All right, sir," Wheeler said. "Thanks just the same."

He walked back to the bar and ordered a double Scotch on the rocks. His hand shook slightly as he picked up the glass. He finished the drink in three swallows and ordered another. After the second drink, he stopped shaking. He was mad.

So he'd pushed the panic button this morning! He knew it. They didn't have to remind him. He'd known it the instant he felt the heat and rolled over and started to run— with Vince Martinez yelling to him from the back seat. But he wasn't the first pilot in the world who'd pushed the button, and he wouldn't be the last. Guys did it all the time. Even big rough Tigers like Mooney, Luke and Kincaid. Nuts to them! If they wanted to give him the silent treatment, he knew a few things about the silent treatment himself.

Wheeler was lying in bed with his face toward the wall when Ike Mooney came into the room they shared in Bachelor Officers' Quarters. He heard Ike pause beside the door.

"Ed, you awake?"

Wheeler did not move or answer. He figured Ike was going to say he was sorry about the pool game, but he didn't want to make it easy. There was a moment of silence, and then Ike shut the door and Wheeler heard him start to undress. He wanted to say something, but somehow he couldn't. Presently Ike turned off the desk lamp and got into bed. By that time it was too late. . . .

It took three days for the Military Air Transport Service to fly in a new afterburner for Wheeler's 94, and another day to install it and pull a flight check. The next morning the twelve interceptors took off in sections of four planes, forty-five minutes apart, and flew from Maine to Goose Bay, Labrador, where they were scheduled to pick up their exposure suits. They had been measured for the suits in Van Nuys, California, and MATS was supposed to deliver them to Goose Bay, so they could be used in making the last two hops over ice and water to Thule. The suits had down-filled interliners and waterproof rubber coveralls with boots attached. They were supposed to keep a pilot warm and happy if he had to bail out in the water, but a lot of the pilots didn't buy it. If you dunked in the Arctic, they said, you'd better get picked up in five minutes, exposure suit or no exposure suit, or the rescue boys needn't bother to break up their poker game.

There were no suits waiting when they reached Moose. After a week, Colonel Randall, the group leader, called a vote among the pilots to see if they wanted to fly on without suits. The pilots voted unanimously to fly. They were getting very sick of Goose Bay. The radar observers did not vote. They had already flown ahead to Thule by MATS. Ed Wheeler was glad the delay was over. He wasn't talking to Mooney or Luke, and to Major Kincaid only when it was officially necessary. He had asked Kincaid to be transferred out of the second-flight section into the lead section. Kincaid had shifted his cigar in his mouth, grinned a little, and said he'd be happy to arrange it, if the lead section didn't mind. Wheeler wanted to hit Major Kincaid, but he didn't dare. But he made up his mind to one thing. The day he delivered the F-94 to Thule he was going to apply for a transfer out of the squadron. He'd had more than enough.

The lead section of Starfires left Goose Bay for Bluie West 1, Greenland, just before lunch, with Wheeler flying No. 3. An hour and twenty minutes later they let down over the Greenland coast and approached BW1 from 10,000 feet. The single runway was tucked in a dead-end canyon at the upper end of a fiord. Two rock mountains walled the runway on either side, and a glacier blocked the far end. To land at BW1, you had to approach from the fiord, regardless of wind direction. To take off, you had to turn the plane around and fly back toward the fiord again.

When Wheeler turned on final approach he found he was almost skimming the fiord ice. He thought they were kidding in Goose Bay when they said that BW1 was the only air base in the world where a man could run into an iceberg as he approached for a landing. Now he knew they hadn't been kidding. There were several icebergs frozen in the fiord a short distance away.

After landing, Wheeler refueled immediately to avoid condensation in the fuel tanks due to low temperature. A tug hooked onto his plane and pulled it into a hangar. Wheeler got out and walked through an unheated sheet-iron passage which connected the hangar with the base Operations building. He had not noticed the cold until he got in the passage. Then it knifed through his Air Force blues and pinched his face with a sharp invisible pressure. The thermometer in the passage, out of the wind, stood at forty-two degrees below zero.

Wheeler walked through the MATS waiting room into the snack bar and bought a ham sandwich and a glass of pineapple juice. He was shivering slightly and his finger tips tingled. The other pilots of his new section were sitting at a nearby table, but they did not invite him to join them. Wheeler did not know how Major Kincaid had managed to have him transferred, but he realized now he might as well have stayed in the second section. He'd simply got out of the frying pan into the fire.

He sat down by himself where he could watch the field. The second section wasn't due in for forty minutes, but he had nothing better to do than sit and wait. Presently an Army captain with an antiaircraft patch on his sleeve approached the table with a cup of coffee.

"Mind if I join you, lieutenant?"

"Not at all," Wheeler said. He felt a small warm twinge. The captain was the first person who had spoken to him in a friendly way in quite a long time.

"Did you come in with the jets?" the captain asked.

"I flew one."

The captain grinned a little. "Well, I guess you won't have to worry about flying it any more for a day or two."

"How's that?"

"I've been standing by for a MATS flight," the captain said. "Operations just canceled us. There's some kind of weather moving in."

Wheeler glanced through the window. The ground visibility was still good and he could not see any clouds in the sky. He ate a little more of his sandwich, drained his pineapple juice, and asked the captain to excuse him. He said he was going into Operations and get the latest scoop on the weather.

The Operations officer was a thin, worried-looking major

with a neatly trimmed black mustache. Wheeler asked him about the weather.

"There's been a quick rise in temperature in the last half hour," the major said. "It's come up about twelve degrees. In these parts that usually means a wind off the icecap."

"A high wind?"

The major looked up. "You must be new around here, lieutenant. We get winds off that cap at times that would make a tropical hurricane feel like a vacuum. The weather guys call it a foehn wind. It always comes after a quick rise in temperature—and I mean it really comes. Last winter a kid tried to walk through one from the barracks to the mess hall. They found him the next morning—hard as a hunk of stone."

Wheeler said, "How about those jets coming in from Goose Bay?"

"We canceled out the last section, but we couldn't catch the second. They'd passed the point of safe return."

Wheeler knew what that meant. Section 2 was committed to Blue West 1. BW1 was now the only base they could reach with the fuel they had. The idea made him feel queer. If Kincaid hadn't transferred him, he'd be out over the water with them now.

He thanked the Operations officer and walked through the double doors at the front of the building. There was another thermometer screwed to the aluminum wall. The joint seemed to be jumping with thermometers. This one read thirty-three below in the faint wind that was blowing in from the fiord. Wheeler turned up his coat collar, but already his body was quivering. The wind made the difference. It increased the chill factor or something. Wheeler dimly remembered such a term from some survival lecture.

He looked across the fiord to the ice cap. A gray cloud deck was moving down from the north. The rim of the cap, which had been clean and sharp when he landed, was now blurred as if by fog. Wheeler didn't know much

about the arctic, but he knew the blur wasn't fog. It was blowing snow. Those Korean Tigers had better get on the ground quick or they might be pushing a few panic buttons of their own. Shooting MIGs was rough. But flying up a dead-end gorge in blowing snow, with a tail wind, was no piece of cake.

Wheeler stepped back into Operations, shivering with cold, and warmed his hands at the oil stove. He read an announcement on the bulletin board which said there would be a bingo party in the Officers' Club next Saturday night. Two cartoons were tacked on the board beside the bingo announcement. The first, titled Northbound, showed two pilots peering anxiously at a shiny new MATS transport. "The wing-tip light looks a bit dim," one was saying. "To take off would mean certain death." The second cartoon, titled Southbound, showed the same two pilots happily puffing cigars in a horribly dilapidated MATS plane with flat tires, broken propellers, and birds nesting in the wings. "She sounds a wee bit rough," one pilot was saying, "but she'll probably smooth out when we get up to cruising altitude."

Wheeler was familiar with the Northbound-Southbound gag, which was a standard among arctic fliers, and normally he would have chuckled, but now he was listening to the sound the wind made against the building. He glanced at his watch. Still twenty minutes before the jets were due.

He walked over to the Operations counter. "Have you made radio contact with the jets yet, major?"

"Not yet," the major replied. "I've been calling, but they don't answer. They may be listening to another channel."

"How's the weather look?"

The Operations officer put his finger tips over his eye sockets and wiped downward with a tired gesture. "I got word from the radar tower out on the mountain. It's hit there already. Fifty-eight knots."

Twelve minutes later, with the jets still unreported, the building buckled slightly, there was a suddenly washing roar and the windows turned milky white. The foehn wind was down off the cap.

Wheeler stood at the counter listening to the gusts push the building, ease off, then push it again. Somewhere overhead a piece of metal buzzed angrily, and up near the roof, at the far corner of the room, a fine powdery mist filtered in through an unseen crack. Wheeler smoked four cigarettes, a few puffs each, and stubbed them out in an ash tray. His mouth and tongue were dry and there was a bitter taste on his lips. He had an almost uncontrollable urge to pick up the ash tray and throw it against the wall.

Finally he said, "What are you going to do, major?" "I don't know. Vector them out on the cap, I guess. They've got a sixty-knot tail wind on the runway now. They couldn't land even if they could see."

Wheeler didn't ask about bailing out. He knew bailing out was impossible. The wind would carry them into the fiord or into the mountains. Even if by some miracle they hit the field they'd probably be dragged to death before they could get rid of their chutes.

The radio on the wall crackled gently and Wheeler heard Major Kincaid's voice, clear and strong, as if he were sitting in the room.

"Hello, Bluie West One. This is Typhoon Red leader. I have four jets seventy miles out at forty thousand. We are ready to start our letdown. Over."

The Operations officer spoke into his desk mike, "Hello, Typhoon Red leader. This is Bluie West One. We have a sixty-knot tail wind on the runway and blowing snow. The visibility is zero. It will be impossible to land your jets. Do you understand?"

"Roger," Kincaid's voice said after a slight pause. "I understand." There was another pause; then Kincaid said sharply, "Well, what's the score? Do you want us to stack up out here for the winter?"

The Operations officer picked up the desk mike. Wheeler saw his knuckles whiten a little. "This is an emergency, Typhoon leader," the Operations officer said carefully. "You will have to belly in on the ice cap. Do you know the emergency procedure?"

"We've had it," Kincaid said. "But give it to us again. We'll check you."

"Fly over the base radio beacon at nine thousand feet. Take up a heading of fifty degrees magnetic. Trim for a hundred and seventy knots—wheels up, flaps down. The ice cap slopes up gradually to eleven thousand feet. It is smooth over a wide area to the north and east. We've checked it with ski-wheel planes. In ten minutes you will make contact with the ice in a safe landing attitude."

The radio hummed empty.

"Hello, Typhoon leader. Did you get my last transmission?"

"Roger, BW1. We got it. What's the visibility on the cap—zero out there too?"

"That is correct, Typhoon leader. You will have to make an instrument letdown. Then dig in until the storm stops. We'll send for you with a ski-wheel rescue plane as soon as we can get one from Goose."

There was a short pause, and Wheeler heard a jet pilot who sounded like Don Luke curse softly into his mike; then Kincaid said, "BW1, we'd love to dig in and wait for your rescue planes, but we happen to be fresh out of shovels. We also happen to be flying in our blues. Some knucklehead never got around to delivering our exposure suits."

Wheeler's stomach pinched tight. Suddenly the thought he had been pushing out of his mind ever since the wind hit was there. This was it. In a short time Section 2 would be down somewhere on the ice cap. In an hour their planes would be thoroughly cold-soaked. By the time anyone reached them they'd be dead—frozen hard as stone.

The radio made a rushing sound and Kincaid's voice came through, blurred slightly by static. "Well, we're going to start our letdown. We'll call you over the beacon."

Wheeler caught the major's eye. He said, "Those jet jockeys just bought the shop, didn't they?"

The major dropped his gaze and looked at his hands. "Yeah," he said softly. "They've bought it."

Then, quite suddenly, Wheeler knew what he had to do. He pivoted one hand on the counter, swung his legs up and slipped over. He picked up the desk mike. "Hello, Major Kincaid. This is Wheeler—Ed Wheeler. Hold your altitude, sir. Nurse your fuel. I'm on my way up there."

"Wheeler? Where are you? Are you airborne?"

"I'm standing in Blue West Operations. I'm gonna throw a bunch of arctic junk in a Ninety-four and scramble. I'll lead you guys down onto the cap and outfit you like Eskimos. Hold tight. I'm on my way."

He slung his body over the counter and sprinted down the corridor to the gear locker. Two airmen were playing cards inside the locker. Wheeler stopped in the doorway. He was thinking very clearly now. He had to make it count now—every step—every word.

He spoke fast. He kept it simple. He told them he needed full arctic survival gear with combat rations for five. He needed it in the back seat of a jet-fighter plane that was parked in the hangar at the other end of the sheet-metal passage. Then Wheeler told them what the stuff was for, and how he intended to deliver it.

The two airmen sat still for an instant after he finished, then broke for the bins. They yelled through the door for help. Other guys poured in. They grabbed huge armfuls of stuff and stumbled through the passage with it and handed it up on the wing of the fighter, where hands grabbed it and stuffed it in the rear cockpit: fur parkas, felt bunny boots, wads of wool socks, ice knives, cartons of C-rations, wind-proof pants, candles, mittens. Wheeler was up front, buckling in, listening to the howl of the starter cart, flicking his starting switches. He heard the 94 begin to rumble, to whine, and then to scream as the rpm's rose to taxi power.

A face thrust in beside him, a voice yelled, "She's solid, sir! You got enough for a platoon for a week!"

The face was gone. The ladder was jerked away. Ed dropped the plastic canopy, turned up his radio, saw the hangar doors grind open ahead of him and taxied outside, through a ring of shifting, yelling faces. The white hurricane hit him. Everything was blotted out. The plane tried to get away to the left, and he held it with brakes and rudder, feeling the wind tear powerfully at the stick in his hand as it struck the elevators and ailerons. He could not see an inch. Everything was white—dirty, solid, shrieking white.

He spoke quickly into his radio, not bothering with voice procedure, "Hello GCA. This is Ed Wheeler in an F-94. I've got to make a ground-controlled take-off. I'm absolutely blind. I want you to direct me to the end of the runway. Do you read?"

"Hello, F-94. This is GCA. Are you cleared for takeoff?"

Ed felt like screaming at them. He didn't. He told them. Quick, simple—like he'd told the airmen. He had to. There was no one else to tell them.

When he finished, GCA said, "On whose authority are you making this take-off?"

Ed spoke very slowly then, spacing each word. "I have no authority to make this take-off. Have you any better suggestion on how to save those guys up there? Now stop yacking. Give me a heading."

There was a pause. Then GCA said, "O.K., F-94, we'll work you. Taxi straight ahead until ordered to turn."

Wheeler added power. The jet began to move with a wallowing motion through the seething snow smoke, rising on its oleos, buffeting and humming as the wind tore past. Wheeler got a left turn, made it with brakes and power, felt the plane start to porpoise and almost go over as the wind caught a wing, then settle back. He got a long straight taxi downwind, and held the brakes to keep the plane from blowing away, forward stick to keep the tail down. Then he got a right, another right, a short upwind taxi, and a hold. "You're lined up on the runway," GCA told him. "You're headed toward the fiord. There is a sixty-knot headwind. Your take-off run should be short. Set your directional gyro on zero heading—following that heading until you are airborne. Then switch to us. Switch quick. The wind is slightly across the runway. It could push you into the cliffs very fast. Do you read?"

"I read you," Wheeler said into his mask mike. "O.K. Make your starting check. Go off when ready." Wheeler set his gyro, checked his flap setting, tail-pipe temperature, hood lock. He took a slow deep breath. Then he opened the throttle, holding brakes. He felt the turbine wind up hard and tight behind him—shifted to high gear. The afterburner booted in like exploding dynamite and he released the brakes and began to roll.

The plane yawed and wallowed, the controls stiffened, he was airborne, and GCA had him. "Ten degrees right! Quick!"

He stabbed rudder in a panic, tense for the crash. "Now fifteen! Fifteen! Hit it!"

He hit it. A white fifteen rolled under the index bar. His arms and legs were taut as steel on the controls. The plane bucked and fell off, caught itself, rose like an elevator, and Wheeler fought it with everything he knew; and then, suddenly, he was moving in relatively smooth air and the altimeter needle was climbing: 200 feet . . . 300 . . . 500. . . . "O.K., F-94," GCA said. "Steady on your present heading. You got it made. You're past the cliffs. Go ahead and make your climb-out."

Ed spoke, but no sound came. He spoke again. "GCA," he said. "Ah—GCA—you—"

He heard somebody chuckle. "Take it easy, fella," GCA said. "You just passed a miracle. We lost you in the cliff return when you broke ground. We thought you'd had it. You must be living right."

Wheeler picked up his gear. His speed jumped to 180

knots. He hiked his flaps. The ground turbulence was nearly gone now. The white-out was still opaque, but it was brighter. At 4000 feet he broke out for

an instant into a hole in the blowing snow clouds, and at 5500 he suddenly shot free into dazzling sunshine. He swiveled his neck, searching the blue sky for Kincaid's jets, and put the 94 in a climbing spiral. At 7000 feet he saw them, four specks angling down from the heights in tight formation.

He spoke into his mask mike, "Hello, Major Kincaid. This is Wheeler. I'm loaded, sir. I've got enough arctic gear and C-rations in the back seat to keep us alive for two weeks. Rendezvous with me at nine thousand over the station and we'll get the show on the road."

Kincaid's voice said, "Nice going, Wheeler. Very nice going. We heard you on GCA. But make it snappy now. These things don't run on fumes."

Wheeler eased out of his spiral at 9000 feet and glanced back through the canopy. The four Starfires were sliding up on his wing tips, sleek, factory-new, their aluminum flanks and blood-red tails glistening in the sun glare. The gulf between planes closed until Wheeler could have read headlines if either of his wingmen had held up a newspaper. He was not able to identify the pilots. They were masked and visored and their crash hats glowed like polished metal in the sun.

Wheeler called base for an altimeter check, got it, and set his altimeter. He trimmed slightly nose-high, at 170 knots, and adjusted his flap setting. Out ahead under the Starfire's nose was a shining ocean of white. It looked calm and serene under the blue sky. Except for the rise and sink of the plane, Wheeler would not have known there was a wind at all. He was very tense now. He was scared again. More scared than on the take-off. But not panicky. It made all the difference.

He spoke into the mask, "Stay tight, you guys. We don't want to get separated after we hit. The walking's lousy down there."

They rogered.

In three and a half minutes they were down, skimming the tops of the snow clouds. Then snow tendrils whipped over their windscreens and the world went pure white. They were in it roughly ninety seconds. Wheeler felt his jet hit something lightly, then very hard; his helmet was slammed into the canopy and there was a prolonged bouncing, grinding scream of metal; then nothing. He jerked his head right and left for the telltale glare of a jet fire. He spoke into the radio, realized it was dead; he felt something warm and dripping inside his oxygen mask. He flipped the blood-soaked mask loose, touched his face with his gloved hand. It was nothing. A bloody nose. Nothing. But his head felt funny and there were jagged glimmers of light before his eyes. The snow clouds outside were thick . . . then lighter . . . then thick again, and there was a hissing, washing pressure against the windscreen. Something rapped sharply on the side of the canopy. He twisted to look. Ike Mooney was out there. His face was bright red and distorted in the snow mist.

Wheeler grabbed the canopy crank. He saw Don Luke outside—and a strange guy he didn't know—and as he started winding the handle he saw Major Kincaid come crawling in on his hands and knees, rise to a crouch, and

drive for the plane like a plunging halfback.

Then the canopy came open and the wind hit Wheeler in the face and bounced his helmet on the headrest. He flipped his seat belt, grabbed the rim of the cockpit and turned his back to the wind. He started to climb out. Something swung toward him from the back seat. It was a fur parka, flapping wildly in the wind. A face thrust in, very close. The face belonged to Ike Mooney. Mooney pushed the parka over the sill into Wheeler's hands. Ike's face looked raw, but he was grinning.

"Be my guest, dad!" Ike yelled happily, above the sound of the gale. "Get those poor old bones of yours in out of the noonday sun!"

Scramble Nighthawk!

When Harold Carter left the Aviation Luncheon which the Chamber of Commerce had held in the Chester Hotel, in Southport, Ohio, nobody could possibly have mistaken him for the small-town newspaperman of song and story. Carter published the Southport Examiner, circulation 23,089, but he was not a lovable old party who hid a heart of gold under a gruff exterior and spent his days foiling dangerous criminals, dispensing homespun philosophy and snatching hurdles from the paths of young lovers.

Harold Carter was a businessman. He was fifty years old, cut his gray hair short, squinted from years of proofreading, and he could be mighty gruff, both inside and out, after a Saturday-night poker session, particularly if he had lost. Carter's store of homespun philosophy was about average, and his only current touch with young love was his eighteen-year-old daughter's crush on Rock Hudson. He had, however, once tangled with a gang of thugs who'd tried to fasten a protection racket on Southport, back in 1949. Carter carried a silver plate in his jaw as a reminder of the affair—but the thugs had a memento too. Four of them now resided in the Ohio State Penitentiary.

The purpose of the Aviation Luncheon had been to discuss the jet fighters which the United States Air Force had stationed recently at the local municipal airport. Ralph DeForest, the former airport manager, had banged his fist so hard on the speaker's table that several spoons had rattled off onto the floor. The USAF, Ralph shouted, was a bunch of highhanded stuffed shirts and they had to go. They'd ruined Southport's chances of ever getting the civil air lines to make scheduled stops in town, and they'd ruined the field itself.

Verne Hathaway, who ran a mink farm on the outskirts of town, then jumped up and yelled that the jets were putting him out of business. Female minks, when frightened or excited, ate their young, Hathaway claimed, and

his minks had been dining on their offspring since the Air Force arrived.

Harold Carter knew Ralph DeForest was sore because the USAF had cost him his job as airport manager, and that Verne Hathaway was a chronic griper, but he also knew they were stating facts. Many a night the jets had jerked him up in bed tense and jittering, certain that World War Three was upon him. The fighters made a high-pitched sizzling scream in normal flight, but when they cut in their afterburners they actually jiggled cuff links on Carter's dresser. The first time he'd heard an afterburner cut in, Carter had rushed outside, believing a plane was coming apart in mid-air. The afterburner made a horrible sound, a sudden Blo-o-o-om—like dynamite exploding in the sky.

Peg, Harold Carter's wife, said Harold owed it to the community to use his newspaper to drive the USAF out of town. Southport was in Southern Ohio, about a hundred miles east of Columbus. Its only industry was the McNaughton Tool Works, and Peg said she doubted if Bulganin was going to send bombers all the way from Russia to wipe out poor old John McNaughton. It was, Peg said, typical of the way the Air Force spent the taxpayers' money. They had all those billions down there in Washington and they had to get rid of it somehow, even if it meant shipping twenty or thirty screaming jet fighters to a peaceful spot like Southport, Ohio. The worst, Peg said grimly, might be yet to come. One day one of those jets was going to get out of control and crash in the street, and a lot of innocent people were going to be killed. Harold needn't tell her it couldn't happen, either. It had happened already in California. Peg had read the wire-service reports in Harold's own paper.

After leaving the Chester Hotel, Harold Carter and Paul Briggs, his editor, started walking north along Main Street to get back to the shop. They had stopped on the corner of Main and Sandusky to wait for a light when Carter heard the jet take off from the airfield.

"Speak of the devil," Briggs said, grinning wryly.

The jet made a blowtorch hissing in the quiet heat, and then, instead of turning away from town as it was supposed to do, the racket suddenly grew louder. Harold Carter stepped back against the facade of the First National Bank and stared up at the sky. For a moment he saw nothing and the sizzling rose to a savage roar. A jet fighter shot over the roof of the Ames Hardware Store in a steep climbing turn, reversed its direction overhead, and for a horrible instant Carter thought it was going to crash in the street. At that instant, the pilot cut in his afterburner. The sudden blast shook the windows of the bank and made Harold Carter duck.

As the jet tore off at full throttle, just above the rooftops, Carter heard a woman's voice cry out and a baby begin to howl loudly. He glanced sideways. A black sedan had come to a stop in the middle of the street and a redheaded young woman whom Carter recognized as Rita Graham, the wife of one of his composing-room men, was holding her baby in her arms and beginning to

sob. Carter checked for moving traffic and ran over to the car.

"Easy now, Rita," he said. "What happened?"

Rita Graham looked at him, her eyes frightened and distressed. "I—I heard the plane—and this horrible noise. I thought it was going to crash, and I stepped on the brake—

and the baby flew forward Oh, do you think he's hurt badly?"

Harold Carter opened the car door. There was blood on the baby's lip, but his eyes were more outraged than hurt, and he was making far too much noise to be seriously injured.

Carter said, "I'm sure it's not serious, Rita, but I'm going to ask Paul Briggs to drive you right over to Doctor Hargrove's—just to make sure. . . . Will you do that, Paul?"

"Glad to, Harold."

"I'd do it myself," Carter said, and his eyes were squinted a little now, and bright, "but I've got urgent business right now—at the airport."

Paul Briggs' eyes widened. "You going to talk to them, Harold?"

"Yes," Harold said grimly. "And they aren't going to like what I have to say!"

A red-faced staff sergeant was typing at a desk outside Col. Ray Tice's office when Harold Carter stepped in from the hall. Carter stood there a moment waiting for the sergeant to look up, and then said curtly, "Are you supposed to be on duty here, sergeant?"

The sergeant's eyes were surprised and a little startled when he looked up.

"I am on duty here, sir," he said shortly. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Carter, publisher of the Southport Examiner. I'd like to see Colonel Tice. Right away."

"Colonel Tice has someone with him right now, sir. Take a seat, please."

Carter looked past the sergeant into the open door of Tice's office. A young man in flight coveralls was hunched forward on a chair, talking earnestly. His hair was sweated and matted, his eyes were bloodshot, and his hands were very dirty. Carter heard him say, "Jake got his hands over his face in time, sir—I think——" Then the young man

saw Carter and stopped. Carter said, in the silence, "I'd like you to tell Colonel Tice I'm here."

The sergeant's lips tightened. "I'm sorry, sir. I never interrupt the colonel when he has visitors."

A tanned, fit-looking man with piercing eyes and a strong chin appeared in the doorway. "It's all right, sergeant," he said, looking at Carter. "I'm Colonel Tice. Is there something I can do?"

"There certainly is," Carter said. "I'm Harold Carter, Southport Examiner. I've got a few things I'd like to tell you."

"All right," Tice said. "Come on in. . . . Lieutenant Ives and I are about

finished, aren't we, Dick?"

The young man with the matted hair stood up. "Yes, Colonel Tice," Ives said. "That's about all."

"Thanks for coming in, Dick," Tice said. "I'll go right over there and see him as soon as I'm finished with Mr. Carter, here."

When the pilot left, Colonel Tice closed the door, took a box of cigars off his desk and offered one to Carter. Carter liked a good cigar, but now he declined. If this Colonel Tice thought he was going to soft-soap the press with a cigar, he was very much mistaken. Tice took a cigar himself, lit it, blew out a cloud of smoke and leaned back.

"All right, Mr. Carter," he said. "Shoot."

In that moment Carter knew Col. Ray Tice would never try to soft-soap him or anyone else. Tice had a smooth manner, but under it Tice was Air Force, and tough. Well, that was all right too. Harold Carter could be tough himself, when he had to be.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush, colonel," he said. "You Air Force people have been running us ragged around here ever since you arrived, and we're sick of it. Oh, I know you have the legal right. You can race around in those jets all day and all night, scaring people out of their wits, and we can't do a thing." Harold Carter paused, looking squarely at Tice. "Legally, I mean," he said. "Legally we can't do a thing. But there's the matter of public opinion. Up until now, I've stayed out of it. But from now on, colonel, I'm going after this base. Maybe I won't get it. But on one point I'm very sure—you Air Force people won't be happy living in Southport!"

Tice blew out a cloud of smoke. "I've been told you're a reasonable man, Mr. Carter. Maybe I was told wrong. You come out here and lay down an ultimatum—and you don't even ask for our side of the story."

Carter could not keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "I'm a country newspaperman, colonel, but that doesn't mean I don't keep track of world events. I know your mission. You jet fliers are supposed to go up and knock down Soviet bombers if they invade the United States." Carter laughed shortly. "Please don't try to tell me, colonel, that we need two squadrons of jet fighters to protect poor little South-port. Or even Columbus. I know Columbus is a big city, and no doubt there are a number of important military targets there, but I simply won't buy the idea that the Russians would pick Columbus after coming over the polar cap or wherever it is they come from. Or even our Pike County atomic project; it's still too new to be of military significance."

Tice's face had lost some of its smoothness. There were lumpy ridges along the jawline. He said, "All right, Mr. Carter; you've laid it on the line. I'm going to do the same. O.K.?"

"Yes, sir!"

"We're running a little exercise tonight," Tice said. "I think I can get you in the back seat of a jet if you want to go. Then you can judge our operation for

yourself."

"I'm a busy man," Carter said. "I haven't got time to go screaming around the neighborhood on one of your silly exercises." He saw Tice's lips curl very slightly, and he snapped, "Don't smirk, colonel. I'm not afraid to ride in your airplanes!"

Tice's face hardened then, and he looked directly and coldly at Carter. "What I heard about you, Mr. Carter, must have been wrong. You're not a reasonable man. You're not even a brave one. Now, sir, unless there's something more you have to say, I've got some work to attend to."

Carter rose. He was trembling. He stood a moment. Then he sat down again. "If your offer to fly that exercise is still open, I think I'll take it."

Tice's eyes flickered. "I think it's only fair to warn you, Mr. Carter. It might get rough."

Carter stared straight back. "All right, colonel," he said. "So it might get rough."

Checking out in the rear seat of a Starfire fighter was more complicated than Carter had expected. By the time an airman had fitted him with a crash helmet, oxygen mask and parachute, and had explained the bail-out and radio procedures, the sun was setting. They left the gear in the plane. There wouldn't be time to monkey around, the airman said, when the scramble started. You piled in, buckled down, and went.

It was quite dark when Carter stepped into the ready room after dinner. The room was full of pilots and radar observers in flight gear. They looked at him when he entered, their faces went blank, and they went back to what they had been doing, without even nodding. Somebody had told those men about him, Carter knew. Maybe the sergeant; maybe Colonel Tice. And the report had not been good.

Carter sat down beside a pilot in the rear of the room, took out a cigar and fumbled for a match. His matches were missing. He looked sidewise at the pilot, and realized the boy had been watching him take out the cigar. The pilot turned slightly away, and began studying a graph of some sort.

O.K., laddiebuck, Carter thought. *Have your innings. Mine are coming.*

He put the cigar back in his pocket, shut his eyes and tried to relax. He could feel his heart beating faster than usual. Carter would never admit it to anyone, ever, but right now he was very nervous. He had never given much thought to his death, but he was giving some thought to it now. These jets did crash. Peg hadn't been the only one who'd read the wire-service report from California.

A young man with a deeply tanned face came through the rear doorway, and Carter caught a glimpse of his name tab as he walked past: J. T. McMahan, Major, USAF. Major McMahan went to the front of the briefing room and sat down on the little table. He had buck teeth, bulgy eyes, and his

hair was clipped short and stuck up like reddish wire.

He said, "Colonel Tice, is it all right to brief?"

Tice was sitting near Carter in the back. He said, "I've cleared Mr. Carter with the Pentagon, Mac. The Information Services Office is cutting a set of invitational orders to cover the flight. He's got verbal permission right now. Go ahead. Just keep off classified stuff."

"Yes, sir," McMahan said. "We might as well start with the weather."

There would be a full moon tonight, and no clouds. Visibility upstairs would be perfect. The night air, however, was making fog in the creek bed beyond the runways, and there might be a landing problem. Not serious, of course. The GCA boys were plenty sharp.

The main thing, McMahan said, was the mission. Tonight's mission was going to be rugged, and important, B-36 bombers were coming in at high altitude and they were going to make a mock raid on the B-47 field at Lockbourne, Ohio, about a hundred miles to the southwest of Southport. It was going to be a flat-out, heels-to-the-wall show, McMahan said, so take it easy. The Starfire was built to go through the speed of sound, but not through the fuselage of the Strategic Air Command's B-36!

The inside of Carter's mouth was dry. From time to time he took in an involuntary convulsive breath. His hands were wet. He rubbed them dry on his trousers at intervals. He'd heard about this base at Lockbourne, vaguely, but he hadn't known what type airplanes were there. B-47's. Carter had heard about the B-47. It was that sleek vee-winged jet bomber that Boeing built. It was supposed to be able to outrun jet fighters. Carter recalled an article about the B-47 he'd read in some news magazine. The gist of the piece was that the B-47 bomber fleet was now America's most potent weapon. It had the speed and the range—with midair refueling—to deliver atomic bombs anywhere in the world. If Russia struck without warning, the article said, they would very probably strike at the B-47 bases first. The reason was simple. Once the B-47 bases were knocked out, the Russians would be safe from massive retaliation. They could then proceed to destroy American cities, industrial complexes and atomic projects at leisure.

"That's about it," McMahan finished, "unless Colonel Tice has something."

"Just one thing, Mac," Tice said. "I'll be carrying Mr. Carter—I can't make any runs. So don't count on me."

"We understand that, sir. We'd like you to fly Tail-end Charlie in the formation—if you don't mind."

Tice said he didn't mind. An hour passed. The room got smoky and Harold Carter's throat felt sore. He walked outside to see how the fog was doing. It lay in a hollow beyond the field, glowing white in the moonlight. Carter listened for bombers, but all he heard was some conversation in the night maintenance hangar and a radio going somewhere in the base. He drank some coffee at the flight-line lunch wagon, not because he wanted it, but because it gave him something to do. Back in the ready room, he sat down and was

finally beginning to get a little sleepy when the loudspeaker hummed shortly and a voice said: "Scramble night-hawk!"

Somebody kicked Carter's foot going by. A chair crashed on the floor. The doors were suddenly jammed with silent rushing men.

"Let's go, Carter!" Tice said.

Outside, Carter saw them sprinting for their planes, heard the sudden snarl of the starter carts, then a jet began to turn up: a soft hum, a hiss, and then a fierce needle whine and the air behind its tailpipe glowed pink in the dark.

Carter floundered into the back seat, strong hands yanked the shoulder harness tight, cinched the seat belt. The air was solid with screaming explosive sound and there was a stench of burnt kerosene, and dust eddied into the cockpit as a jet pulled out of line and whined away in the darkness. Carter slipped his helmet on, cinched the oxygen mask, and saw his helper drop down off the wing and run clear of the plane.

"Tice to Carter," a voice said, in his earphones. "Get your hands in your lap, sir. Keep them there."

"Right," Carter said into his mask mike. "Hands in lap, Colonel."

The canopy came part way down, stopped, and Carter saw Tice twist right and left, checking to make sure the canopy was clear. Then it dropped completely and locked shut, and Carter felt the jet immediately begin to move. Out of the side of the canopy, he saw five glowing tailpipes, like orange lamps, moving ahead in a spaced line. The leader reached the runway, held, and suddenly made a savage Blo-o-m and blue flame torched from the tailpipe as the plane began rolling, picked up speed, and went off the ground very flat. For several seconds it held low, then rose in a fantastic climb, like a blue rocket.

"Hello nighthawk base" Major McMahan's voice said calmly, startlingly clear in Carter's helmet. "Nighthawk leader airborne. Request vector."

"Roger, nighthawk leader. I have a raid coming in from Akron. Looks big. Can't tell yet but it could be max altitude. Better use afterburners in your climb, Mac. The vector is one zero. I say again. The vector is one zero."

"Thank you, nighthawk base. The vector is one zero. Use afterburners. Nighthawk leader out."

The planes went off close together and in a few moments Carter heard their own afterburner blast in, and his head sagged a little as the jet started down the runway. The hangars rushed past, fell away, and Carter looked down on the outskirts of Southport; the glaring red sign on Dave's Diner, a short glimpse of a love scene on the Valley Drive-in screen; then the F-94 climbed very rapidly and Carter saw the highway that led westward toward Columbus, a long winding ribbon in the moonlight, dotted at intervals with moving headlights.

There was an altimeter in the rear cockpit. Carter watched the pointer move quickly to 5,000 feet . . . 10,000 . . . 15,000 ... He raised his head and looked out, and almost yelled in fright. A jet fighter rode close beside him—so close

he could see the flush rivets on the moon-bright wing. Beyond the first fighter were others, all packed so close they looked like one weird many-winged plane, gently undulating in the moonlight.

If, I get down from this crazy thing, Carter thought, if I just get down this one time——

"Hello, Nighthawk leader," the voice from the ground control said. "Better get up there, Mac. You're due to intercept in about three minutes."

"Roger, Nighthawk base. We're at thirty-four thousand now. Well be up there."

Carter peered through the left side of the canopy. A big city, which he supposed must be Columbus, made a gigantic bonfire glow on the southwest horizon. The firefly collection of lights almost under them might be Newark, or maybe Zanesville. The Ohio countryside was dark and Carter could see the river valleys, like winding snakes, white with fog.

A voice Carter hadn't heard before said suddenly, "Tal-lyho! Six bombers! Two o'clock down! Fifteen miles!"

Carter peered tensely to the right, saw nothing, and then Tice dipped the wing slightly and uncovered six white contrails eating their way southward like broad white rapiers against the black void. Carter saw the planes, then, in the moonlight. They were enormous—with long snouts and tapering wings, and six separate stripes of white sucked out of the pusher propellers, stayed apart for a thousand feet, then curled together like white smoke into a luminous pathway under the moon.

A voice snapped: "Hello, Nighthawk leader. This is Nighthawk base. I just got a ground-observer report. A Thirty-six slipped in low from the south—under the radar screen. It is very close to target. Divert two fighters at once!"

There was an instant of silence; then McMahan's voice, "Sorry, Nighthawk base. We have our hands full. Impossible to divert!"

Carter saw McMahan peel off and vanish. An instant later the diving fighter started pulling a contrail, slashing a sharp white stripe through the night toward the onrushing bombers—and a second fighter was gone from beside Carter—and a third——

Carter realized he was holding his breath. He gulped in air—and then an imaginary picture snapped vivid and clear into his mind. In his mind he imagined that the bomber that had sneaked in under the radar screen from the south was not a B-36, but a strange make, and instead of the white star and bar of the USAF, the emblem on its flank was bloody red.

"Colonel Tice, you hear me, sir?"

"Yes, Carter. Something wrong?"

"Colonel, can we intercept that B-36 down south?"

He heard Tice take a breath. "Uh—why, sure, Mr. Carter. If you think you can stand it, I——"

"Stop yacking!" Carter said. "Let's go!"

He heard Tice gasp, then chuckle very softly. "Yes, *sir!*" Tice said.

The fighter banked steeply, and screamed south at full power, following directions from ground control. Carter sat very still and watched the bonfire glow of Columbus go past, on the right this time, and picked up Buckeye Lake, dead ahead, milky white with fog. Beyond Buckeye was the glow of a town—Lancaster, probably—and beyond Lancaster was blackness.

"Mr. Carter, is your safety belt fastened?"

Carter bent awkwardly and searched out the safety belt among the mass of straps and webbing. He touched it with his fingers.

"Safety belt O.K., colonel."

"Roger," Tice said. "Keep a lookout now. If you spot him, sing out."

Carter felt a sudden hot twinge in his throat. Suddenly he wasn't just Harold Carter, of the Examiner, out on a practice flight. He was a radar observer—R.O., they called it—with orders to search out and report the enemy. He leaned forward and swung his head from side to side, peering downward into the night. Two minutes passed. He saw a pair of green and red lights far away to the west, and was taking a breath to tell Tice, when he saw, directly under him, a broad white contrail moving swiftly to the west.

"He's down there!" Carter shouted. "Straight down, colonel!"

"Good show," Colonel Tice's voice said, and Carter felt the plane lift in a climbing turn. "Got him." Tice's voice said. "Hold tight. This is it."

The horizon tilted smoothly on end, the moon and stars slipped out of sight under the belly, and leaning his head far back against the headrest, Harold Carter hung on the safety belt and stared up through the canopy at the black, fog-pocketed face of Ohio. Tice held the plane on its back, and Carter saw the white tail of the B-36 raider move swiftly through the dark, and then Tice pulled through and they were in a vertical dive. The air pressure hit Carter's ears—soft thumb tips . . . squeezing pegs . . . vicious, red-hot needles that seemed to be shoving through his eardrums into his brain. He wanted to scream, but somehow he didn't scream. He had lost sight of the bomber trail, and then, with lazy smoothness, the dark world below rotated like a slowly turning wheel as Tice rolled to get on target—and the contrail flowed into sight directly below.

For a horrible instant Carter thought Tice had lost his mind and was trying to ram the B-36, and then he saw the trail move out from under them with deceptive speed, and Tice held the mighty bomber for a heartbeat in his rocket sights, and they were past and screaming downward toward the reaching hills. The nose of the fighter started up with terrible deliberateness. Carter saw a barn, a row of moonlit trees, felt his body sucked brutally down into the seat and shut his eyes in horror, braced for the grinding blast of flesh and metal against the earth.

His sight went dim, then black, and for a moment he thought his body was coming apart under the G-load of the pull-out, and then he was looking up at the stars, light—light as a bubble, and Tice's voice was saying happily, "We clobbered him, Carter! Right down the back of his neck!"

Carter did not reply. His mask was wet inside. He thrust a finger past the tight rubber, brought it out covered with blood. "Hemorrhage!" he choked. "Blood on my face! Colonel!"

Tice's voice said, "Don't worry, Carter. It's nosebleed. Lots of us get it. Particularly R.O.'s. There's more G in the back seat."

Carter snatched his mask clear and retched, and coffee splashed over the radar console in front of his knees. He lay limp then, and shut his eyes, and tried to concentrate on the ground and how firm it was. His stomach seemed to be expanding inside him, then contracting, and the blood was trickling down, sweet and salty, over his lips.

Presently he felt the plane bank and opened his eyes. One wing was pointed at the stars. The other was sticking down toward a bank of solid white. The fog had moved in, as McMahan had predicted, and there was going to be a landing problem. Carter, at that moment, was not up to any landing problems. He shut his eyes again, thinking firmly: *The GCA is sharp—the GCA is sharp*. The plane banked smoothly several times, and a flow of meaningless flight directions came through Carter's headset. He did not look out until he felt the power go off, and then he almost passed out. They were sinking at high speed into an absolutely opaque wall of white.

Please, God, Carter thought.

He saw orange blobs suck up on either side out of the white; there was a brushing jolt of rubber against asphalt, and they were rolling straight through the white wall between the dim orange lights. Tice's voice said cheerily, "Didn't like that one much myself. Thank God for GCA!"

Carter said, "Get this thing stopped, colonel! Quick! Didn't know a man's stomach could hold so much!"

The debriefing was in progress when Harold Carter finished cleaning up his suit and sponging his nose with cold water to stop the bleeding. He stepped quietly into the rear of the briefing room and sat down beside the pilot who'd ignored him earlier. His head was ringing and he could taste blood, and he felt as if he'd just got out of bed after the flu. Major McMahan was giving a recap of the mission. The Southport fighters had done fine, he said. They'd grand-slammed the B-36 raid coming in from the north. But the other fighter base over near Dayton hadn't done too well. A raid had sneaked in from the west and thrown out radar chaff. The radar chaff had suckered those boys out of position, and by the time they regrouped it was too late. Three B-36's got through to Lockbourne—and three of them were enough, more than enough!

Harold Carter did not know what radar chaff was, but he was surprisingly upset about the bombers' getting through. Not romantically either. Now he knew what Lock-bourne was. It was one of America's strong points—really strong. They could not afford to have bombers hit Lock-bourne, not tonight, not ever.

"One thing I know you'll all be glad to hear," McMahan said then. "Jake

Ellis is going to be O.K. His hands got it pretty bad, but the fire didn't get to his eyes. The doc said he'll be back in the back seat in a week."

McMahan paused and looked at Harold Carter. "Jake Ellis is one of our R.O.'s, sir. His radar console blew up on take-off this noon. He had the fire right in his lap. Dick Ives, his pilot, threw the plane into a vertical reversement over town and came back to the base on afterburner." McMahan smiled a little. "Dick kind of wanted to get Jake on the deck."

Carter did not meet McMahan's eyes. He was thinking how cramped it had been in the back seat of an F-94, and how this Ellis kid must have felt with the fire in his lap, at the moment he had seen his jet bank over the Ames Hardware Store and go tearing away with its afterburner roaring. "You come out here and lay down an ultimatum," Tice had said, "and you don't even ask us for **our** side of the story."

Carter stood up and began to talk. He told them about the Aviation Lunch, and he told them about seeing the jet bank steeply over town, and about Rita Graham's baby. He told it bluntly and factually, not trying to soften it or pretty it up. There were really two sides to this thing, he said. Up until this evening, he'd known only one side. Now he knew the other side. He was going back to his newspaper and try to report the other side—the Air Force side—tomorrow, and day after tomorrow, and as long as the town was lucky enough to have the Starfires with them. He knew it would take a while, and the Air Force should expect it, but eventually the folks of Southport would understand what was at stake. Carter was not apologizing **for** the folks in Southport. They were fine folks. They just hadn't had time to get the other side of the picture. Now he was going to see to it that they got it.

Carter sat down. Suddenly he wanted a smoke. He fished a cigar out of his pocket, remembered he had no matches, and started to put it back. A lighter clicked and a small bright flame wavered in front of his face. He leaned the cigar into it and inhaled. The smoke tasted wonderful. He drew it in deeply, let it out slowly. He turned toward the pilot beside him. "Thanks for the hght, son," he said. "I appreciate it."

"Roger, sir," the pilot said.

Then the pilot said something that Harold Carter would cherish in his mind all the rest of his life—a silly little remark, really, but if you had ever dived on a bomber at night, at close to the speed of sound, maybe it wasn't so silly after all. "Colonel Tice told us about the B-36, Mr. Carter," the pilot said. "If you should ever get sick of running your newspaper in town, come on out to the base. We have a spot for you." The pilot grinned at him, and suddenly Carter noticed that the rest of the guys in the room had turned and were also grinning. "A good R.O. is hard to find these days, sir," the young pilot said.

35¢

off!



With the speed-past-speed of the incredible planes he knows so well, these fine stories by Frank Harvey zoom the reader right into the middle of the Air Force. The *present-day*, up-to-the-minute Air Force — in which the P-38's and P-47's of World War II are already memories.

Already known to millions through his many appearances in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Frank Harvey here presents his first book. JET proves clearly that here is an author who knows what's going on in the world of the air and knows how to present it in swift, hard, breathtaking fiction.

It's a book for anyone who ever craned his neck when a jet flew by overhead.



This is an original collection—not a reprint.

Printed in U.S.A.